

JASON HAMILTON



# **Through Fire**

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Roots of Creation Book 3

Jason Hamilton

Story Hobby Media

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# F

or the first time in weeks, Jak experienced the heat of aggression mixed with a hint of fear. Before her, nearly a mile out but clearly visible to Jak due to its size, was a Watcher caravan. It was the first she had seen since leaving Skyecliff two weeks earlier, after leaving the city in chaos. She had almost wondered if she was going in the right direction. But Gabriel had assured her that the exquisite armor and weapons they'd found in Skyecliff were sourced in the south-eastern mountains near Mt. Harafast. Perhaps in the mountain itself.

No one knew where the Watchers were getting such well-made armor and weapons. But one thing was clear, they were stockpiling it. Or rather, Queen Telma was ordering them to do so. Watchers normally wouldn't be bothered to guard something like a merchant caravan, but something about this smith work made it special, and Jak suspected it was more than just the quality of the craftsmanship.

She was alone now, traveling alone for the first time in...well actually for the first time. She'd run across a few people between here and Skyecliff, some of them even friendly, but most of the time she was alone.

In her younger years, she always had her father with her, which had annoyed her at times, though now she would give anything to have him back again. His wisdom and counsel had carried her through her adventures thus far, not to mention his brand of Telekinesis was one of the most powerful magical abilities one could have. Jak had tried to replicate it on various logs or stones when she camped each night, but was having difficulty figuring it out.

She was a Gifter, a person with the ability to grant brands, or magic powers, to anyone who did not already have one. But something about Jak, she did not know exactly what yet, made her special. She had the unprecedented ability to give more than one brand to people or objects. Assuming she could get them right, of course. Telekinesis still eluded her. But just weeks ago, to save her own life, she had given herself the brand of Healing, Strength, and

Flamedancing, the ability to create and control fire.

She was now one of the most magically gifted people in the queen's realm. The only other person who came close was Naem, who was the first and only person she had branded besides herself. He now had Healing and Toughness, in addition to his first brand, Grace, or the ability to perform great feats of acrobatic and fighting skill with ease.

Jak's forehead creased at the thought of Naem. Her experience with that one had not ended well. The traitor had the nerve to befriend her, to claim to love her, only to betray her in the end. She hoped she never saw him again.

She turned her attention back to the caravan. It was closer now, and they'd be able to see her soon. Where could she hide? There wasn't much around in almost any direction. She was on the great plains, plains that continued all the way to her home province of Riverbrook, where her friend Seph was gathering the Fae.

Not far in front of her, she spotted a small incline along the side of the road. It wasn't much, but she could hide behind that small hill and hopefully the Watchers wouldn't see her.

Unless she wanted to be seen of course.

She didn't want to pick a fight with the Watchers. Even with her added brands, many of which were quite powerful. And she'd be hard-pressed to fight them if one or more was a Telekinetic. One Telekinetic she could probably best, but with other Watchers present, she wasn't sure she could handle them too.

Yet it would be nice to get a peek at the equipment they were carrying, or maybe one of the Watchers held some clues on where, specifically, they were coming from.

She reached the other side of the small hillock and lay down, waiting. It took several minutes for the caravan to approach, but the rattle of wheels finally gave them away. Jak peaked over the top of the hill, hoping none of them were looking in her direction.

There were two large wagons and one smaller box on wheels tied to the one in the back. There were...six Watchers in full armor and two other men who looked like nobles of some kind. Probably some of the queen's men sent to watch over whatever they were carrying in those wagons. And she wondered what was behind the wagon in that small box. It wasn't very large.

"Hey, metal-heads, isn't it about time you let me stretch my wee legs?"

Jak barely stopped herself from rising to her knees in shock. The voice had come from the tiny box. There was someone *inside* that thing. But surely no human could fit inside that.

"Quiet," said one of the Watchers, glancing about as if to look for

someone who might overhear. “No talking or we’ll put you out again.”

“You know,” the box spoke again. “If you don’t want me alerting random passersby that I’m in here, you might start by letting me out, so I can see them coming and hide.”

“I’ve got a better idea,” said the Watcher. He waved a hand to the others who brought the horses to a halt. “How about I just put you under again, then we don’t have to worry about you making any noise.”

“Joke’s on you,” said the box. “I snore.”

What was Jak to do? These Watchers clearly had a prisoner, and a very small one at that. Only a child could fit in that box, yet the voice didn’t sound like a child. It was high-pitched and shrill, almost like an old man’s, yet not exactly frail in the same way. Definitely a man’s voice, but what kind of man would fit inside a box that size. Unless...

Her mother had suspected there were Fae in the south-eastern mountains. Could this be one of them? If so, Jak was left with no other options. Peeking over the side of the hill again, she did her best to spot the Watcher’s brands. One looked like he had a Strength brand. She could deal with that. But many of the others either had their left hands covered by their armor, or were simply too far away for Jak to make them out.

The Watcher who spoke was fiddling with the lock on the small box. In his hand he held a vile with a light-blue liquid inside. Probably a potion to put whoever was in the box to sleep.

The lock clicked and the Watcher swung the top of the box open. The other Watchers drew close, surrounding the box to keep the occupant from escaping.

“Here, take this.” The first Watcher leaned forward and uncorked the vile.

She couldn’t wait any longer. If she wanted to speak to this prisoner alive and lucid, she had to act now. Without another moment’s hesitation, she activated her brands.

Flamedancing was her biggest offensive weapon in combat. Her other brands of Healing and Strength were more passive, though the latter was quite useful in close-combat situations. But until she could close the distance between her and the Watchers, she had to rely on her flames.

The Watchers were taken completely by surprise. Many of them not even noticing her flames until they engulfed them. A few screamed as white-hot fire licked at their faces and eyes. Hair withered and burned. Two of the Watchers went down, clutching their faces.

But Jak’s surprise advantage didn’t last long. Within moments her fire changed direction, coming back at her without her bidding. One

of the Watchers had his arms out, redirecting the flames. So they had a Flamedancer too. She could deal with that.

From her back, she swung her father's spear, brandishing it in front of her. It too held several brands, those of Healing and Toughness, meaning it could take a massive beating and not break under the force of her Strength-enhanced blows, any little notches healing themselves.

Ignoring the other Watchers for the moment, she lunged at the Flamedancer, channeling flames through her spear as she went. The Watcher took two steps back from her quick and aggressive onslaught. But Jak knew the best way to take down a Watcher was to do it quickly. The Watcher couldn't get out of the way fast enough, as he was too busy trying to redirect the flames that she sent at him. Her spear connected in his shoulder. He cried out, and Jak pulled the spear-tip out of his flesh and whirled the spear around to connect the wooden end with his head. He dropped instantly, out cold.

That was three Watchers down, including the first two. But just as she turned to face them, she felt an invisible vice-like grip grab hold of her. Great, they did have a Telekinetic after all.

The invisible power spun her around to face the Telekinetic Watcher. He stood with one hand outstretched, but looking completely calm, as did those around him. They thought she was beaten. What they didn't know was that she also possessed the brand of Strength, which just happened to be the only defense against a Telekinetic hold.

Straining, Jak pushed with all her might, willing her arms to rise. The Watcher's face tensed as he felt her physical strength compete against his mental hold. Jak continued to fight against the force holding her, and a look of amazement crossed the Telekinetic's face. He was probably wondering how a small girl could be so strong. It most likely didn't even occur to him that she had multiple brands, hidden under Jak's sleeves. Perhaps they would notice that the brand on her left hand was not a Flamedancer brand. That would confuse them.

Jak redoubled her efforts, pushing as hard as she could. With an audible snap, the Telekinetic's hold broke, and she fell two feet to the ground, catching herself gracefully. Well, as gracefully as she could without the brand of Grace. When Naem dropped to the ground, he probably...

No, she couldn't think about that right now. Looking back at the remaining Watchers with a slight smile, she drew fire around herself and launched it at the Watcher's disbelieving faces. No other Flamedancer was there to protect them this time. They ran screaming as their hair and clothes caught fire. In the chaos, it wasn't hard for Jak to catch each of them soundly with the butt of her spear, knocking

them out.

She gathered the fire back to herself, making sure that the unconscious warriors were not seriously damaged. She would kill someone if she had to, but only as a last resort. She didn't even like to kill demons if she could help it, given the fact that they were former humans mutated by magic.

"Seems rather a lot for a little girl," said the strange voice behind her. "What kind of mushrooms did you eat?"

She turned to finally get a good look at whomever had been in that box. And...she tilted her head in wonderment. The man, if he could be called that, stood no more than two feet high! Proportionally he wasn't that much different from a man, though he was a bit plump. His hair was a flaming red color, spiking on top of his head. And his arms were folded as he regarded Jak.

"I...hello," Jak said, trying her best to stop staring.

"Go on, get it over with."

"Uh, get what over with?"

"Your questions. How did I get this short, is this my natural hair color, how do I use the privy. The answers are, I've always been this way, yes it is, and we have the sense to build smaller privies."

"Um, I wasn't going to ask any of that," Jak said, sheepishly. "And aren't you going to say thank you?" She didn't care really, of course she didn't, but a little acknowledgement would have been nice. She had just taken on eight people after all, six of them Watchers.

"Oh, so it's gratitude you want, eh?" He sniffed. "Well I suppose that's better than the other things. Why aren't you surprised to see me?" He narrowed his eyes at her.

"I was." Jak clarified. "But I knew whoever was in that box had to be small."

"Yeah, but you're not freaking out? Why aren't you freaking out?" he almost sounded hurt that she wasn't reacting the way he expected.

"Well, you're a Fae, aren't you?" Jak had figured that out almost the moment she saw him. At two feet high, and with natural hair color like that, there was no way he was an ordinary human. A human once, maybe, like the other Fae. They were all human until some force, often originating from an ancient Relic had turned them into something different. Well, not different exactly, something more.

The small man's face furrowed. "We don't like that name," he growled. "That's what they call us." He pointed at the men lying around them. "Don't call me that."

"Okay," Jak let her eyes rise in thought. None of the other Fae had ever objected to being called by that name, though Amelia, her best friend, hadn't really liked the name Water Fae. So far, Jak knew of three kinds of Fae: Shadow Fae, Bright Fae, and Water Fae. Though

she could admit, referring to them by those names would get tedious eventually, especially if more varieties of Fae joined them. “So what should I call you?”

The little man puffed out his chest and stood tall, well, as tall as he could. “I am a gnome. That is what we call ourselves, and what all people will know us by eventually. You may call me Girwirt.”

“Girwirt.” Jak tested the name on her tongue. It was a strange name, but no stranger than the little man, or the gnome, appeared physically. “Why were the Watchers carrying you in that box, Girwirt.”

“They were taking me to their home, so far as I could tell. Skyrock or something like that.”

“Skyecliff?” Jak offered.

“That’s the one. Didn’t really care myself, it was better than being a slave in that mountain.”

Jak perked up. “You were in a mountain? Was it Mt. Harafast? Tell me more.”

“No, I don’t really want to,” said the gnome. He was looking around now, taking in the flat land in every direction. “I say, is there anything but grass around here?”

“You won’t find anyone close by for fifty miles at the least. Why don’t you want to tell me?”

“Because the last place I want to think about is that mountain. I’m free now. I’d better make the best of it.”

“Okay,” said Jak, going along with his logic for now. “What’s your plan?”

“Walk in one direction.”

“No, I mean, after that. You’ll need food and water eventually, and where are you going?”

“Doesn’t matter, so long as it’s not here.” His arms were folded again, and he was looking side-eyed at Jak.

“So your people are slaves, and you don’t want to go back and help them?”

“Not much I can do here. Why, are you offering?”

Jak came clean. “If your people are enslaved, I want to help them. But I’ll need a guide to get me inside the mountain. If you will do that, I will do what I can for your people.”

Girwirt made a huffing sound. “You’re clearly capable, lass, I saw you take out them Watchers, but they were six, and there are hundreds of them in the mountain.”

“I won’t attack them directly,” Jak said. “But you’d be surprised what I can do.” Then she rolled up her sleeves and showed him the multiple brands.

He stared at the brands for a long moment, but surprised Jak

by...not being surprised at all. He looked up at her, meeting her eyes. "Well, that explains something. Tell me, are you...good?" He said the last word like he couldn't find another to use. "Like a good person?"

"...like to think so."

"And how can you convince me of that?" His voice was lower now, more sober. Jak had the feeling that a lot would ride on her answer.

"I know other Fae, yes I know you don't like that term, but that's what they call themselves. There are many now, and each type governs some kind of elemental power. Like light, darkness, and water." She wondered for a moment what the gnome's element was, but now was probably not a good time to bring that up. "Also, my mother is a Fae. She changed while pregnant with me. I don't really have any way to prove it, but I've spent the last year doing what I can to help the Fae. I'll do the same for you."

The gnome considered her. "Well, I suppose you did save me from those men, even if you didn't know what I was. At least you were trying to help someone in need." He ran a hand through his spiky red hair. "I don't know. It's risky."

"I'll take the risk," Jak said immediately. "I've been in tight spots before."

"Yeah, I don't really care about you. It's the others that worry me. What will happen to them if you fail? I've spent a lot of time working against your Watcher people in that mountain, and we could not afford even the slightest setback."

"What could be worse than being slaves?" Jak asked.

"Like you know a lot about slavery. You have no idea what it's like."

"I know that if there's anyone who could help you, it's me. But if it makes you feel better, I'll do my best to avoid the Watchers and not cause any disturbances until I have a better idea of how to help your people."

Girwirt kept running his hand through his fiery hair, long enough that Jak wondered if he'd heard her correctly. Finally he spoke again. "Very well, if you'll do what you say you'll do, I'll take you to the mountain. I've got nowhere else to go anyway."

"Thank you, Girwirt!" Jak said. She could have probably made it there on her own, but having the little gnome around could give her a lot of information on what she'd find there, and perhaps how to get in without being seen.

Girwirt strode over to the first wagon and with a great leap pulled himself onto the bottom step. "I'll bet there's some armor in here that would fit a girl like you," he said as he took another jump to get higher up on the wagon.

"Erm, do you want a hand with that?" Jak offered.

“No, of course not, I can make do. Though you tall folk really should make everything a little shorter.”

Jak raised her eyebrows but said nothing as Girwirt finally crested the edge of the wagon, and began rummaging through the weapons. One of the Watchers was stirring on the ground, so Jak walked up to him and jammed the butt of her spear into his head to knock him out again.

“We’re going to need to do something about that lot,” said Girwirt, throwing aside a plate gauntlet and continuing to sort through armor. “Without their wagon they’ll probably double back to the mountain and alert everyone there.”

“I’m not going to kill them if that’s what you’re suggesting.”

“Do you see another alternative?”

Jak thought it through. There really wasn’t much that they could do. They would just have to take their chances that these Watchers didn’t alert anyone to their presence in the mountain. Perhaps if they could stay hidden well enough, it wouldn’t matter what the Watchers said. They didn’t know for sure that Jak and Girwirt were going back to the mountain. And they were too far away from Skyecliff to worry about the Watchers going there. Besides, Jak didn’t intend to be in that mountain long enough for the queen to send reinforcements against her.

“I’ll tie them up, and we’ll leave as much food and water as we can. Then we’ll take their wagon. That should give us a solid head start.”

Girwirt shrugged, throwing another piece of armor over his head.

“Where do they get these anyway?” Jak asked as she too drew near the wagon full of armor and weapons. “They’re beautiful.” She ran one hand along an arm plate with a large beast etched into it that Jak didn’t recognize. It looked like a lizard with wings, and huge jaws, and something that almost looked like fire coming out of them. The embossing was so good, it almost looked like the animal was moving.

“This is our work.” said Girwirt. He puffed out his chest as he said it.

“The Gnomes made this?”

Girwirt scratched his head. “Well, I guess you could say that without us it would be impossible. But I suppose the Dwarves helped a bit.”

“Dwarves?” Jak’s eyes narrowed in confusion. “But...aren’t you...I mean.” “Dragons and darkness, you’re an ignorant one. Don’t even know the difference between dwarves and gnomes.” He was shaking his head.

Jak harrumphed. No one knew the difference between dwarves and gnomes because pretty much no one even knew they existed. But

she got the feeling that explanation wouldn't change anything about Girwirt's attitude. So instead she said, "I'm sorry, what is the difference?"

"They're the ones that find the materials, of course," said Girwirt, as if it were the most well-known fact in the world. "Here, put this on." He lifted up a set of light armor for Jak to look at, grumbling something like "giants" and "impractical" under his breath. Jak tilted her head at the armor. It did look about her size, and wouldn't slow her down too much. Besides, it was beautiful.

"So these dwarves." She said as she set about strapping bits of the armor around herself. "Are they in the mountain too?"

"That's right," said the gnome. "Your giant friends keep us there, building weapons."

"And why don't you try to escape? Or revolt?"

"Dragons and daredevils, it's not that easy, lass. You have any idea what it's like fighting a giant like you? They'd cut us down in seconds."

"But surely you have some...abilities that you could use? The Shadow Fae, they can make themselves unseen, or summon darkness. What can you do?" This was the question she really wanted to ask.

Girwirt paused. "That thing you did, with the fire? Well it's something like that."

"You're like a Flamedancer? But that's a super useful ability."

Girwirt was shaking his head. "It's not the same. We can't throw it around willy nilly like you giants can. We can sense the building blocks of life, and increase their vibration. That's what makes fire."

Jak frowned. How on earth did vibration create fire? That made no sense at all. But she ignored it for the time being. "And the dwarves, do they create fire too?"

"Nonsense, girl. I told you, they find the materials."

"And...what does that mean, exactly?"

Girwirt sighed, as if Jak was a child to whom he had to explain the most basic information. "They're connected to the materials in the mountain, in the Earth, in the ground. Not nearly as useful as what us Gnomes can do," he said proudly, "But they find what we need and together we shape it. Simple."

Jak wouldn't call it simple exactly, but it was definitely interesting. "I'd very much like to meet these dwarves, and the rest of your people."

"Well," Girwirt loosed the harness connecting the horses to the wagon. "Assuming your giant Watchers don't kill us first, or burn us alive, or capture us and send us to the ends of the Earth, I'm sure you'll get that chance."

He waved at Jak, indicating she should take a horse. "Come on,

lass, or the beast will leave without you. Does it look like my little legs can get it to move?"

Glad that she had grown up with horses, Jak guided one by the bridle, a beautiful white draft horse. Disconnected now from the wagon, it had no saddle, but Jak could handle that. She thought.

Running a hand on the horse's muzzle and side, she grabbed its mane and swung herself up onto its back. Girwirt jumped off the wagon to land behind her. "I don't much like these things. Naught but dragons should be this big, but it seems everything is backwards with you giants. Nothing the size it should be."

Turning the horse, Jak guided it to a soft canter, and smiled with some amusement as Girwirt clung to her, muttering under his breath.

Well, this was certainly going to be interesting.

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irwirt didn't stop complaining much as they rode towards the mountains. The blue peaks slowly grew larger on the horizon, and it seemed the gnome's discomfort grew the closer they got.

Jak didn't mind his relentless chattering, honestly. It was kind of refreshing. None of the other Fae had behaved quite like Girwirt, and she loved getting to know more about him and his people as he spoke. He didn't always talk about them, but she picked up bits and pieces here and there. She learned that they couldn't control fire in the same way that a Flamedancer could. They could create fire in fuel, like wood. Or they could make metal red hot, like in a blacksmith's forge. But they couldn't direct any of that as a weapon. Or at least not effectively. And apparently the Watchers had a lot of Flamedancers in the mountain to make sure the Gnomes didn't try anything.

She also figured out that the gnomes and dwarves had lived in the mountain for far longer than any other Fae that she knew about. Whereas the Shadow Fae had appeared seventeen years ago, and the Bright and Water Fae far more recently. But when she probed Girwirt, asking how long since their transformation, he looked at her like she was slow. "We've always been like this," he said, and left it at that. Jak found that information frustrating. And there didn't seem to be a Relic involved either. Either they had always had their abilities, as Girwirt claimed, or it was so long ago that no one remembered anymore. She wished there was a consistent pattern to how these Fae came into being. Perhaps then she could figure out what caused it and for what purpose.

About another day into their journey, Jak could clearly see the mountain they were looking for: Mt. Harafast. It was absolutely magnificent, towering almost twice as high as the mountains around it. Girwirt expressed some pride at seeing Jak's reaction. "It's been our home for as long as anyone can remember," he said, though there was a note of sadness in his voice. Jak understood why. It was no longer a home now, it was a prison.

They avoided two other caravans on their way there, staying off to

the side of the road for most of the journey. There were more foothills here, and it became easier to hide. But when the horse got restless and nearly gave them away, they decided it was best to let it go and continue the rest of the way on foot.

They weren't far from the mountain. It towered above them, almost ominously. They completely avoided the road now. Watchers guarded it in small encampments. Even off the roads, they had to be extremely careful, as patrols wandered randomly around the mountain. It was more security than Jak had ever seen, even in Skyecliff. Girwirt kept complaining that it was much harder to hide with someone as large as her hanging around. But they managed to stay out of sight.

They were hidden now, behind a brush on the other side of a foothill from the main road, hoping that the dim morning light wouldn't give them away. It must have been another patrol, because they too were leaving the road, looking around cautiously. There were two of them. One in armor, and the other in a dark cloak and hood. Jak couldn't see the latter's face, but he was tall, whoever he was.

Had they caught Jak and Girwirt's scent? Jak hastily looked at the ground to see if their footprints were too pronounced. Yeah, they were there, she could see them. And if she could, surely someone trained to look would find them. But there were footprints everywhere, right? How would they know the prints weren't from another patrol of Watchers?

"Hmm," muttered Girwirt. "That's unusual."

Jak followed his gaze to look at the patrol, squinting through the light of the rising sun. Come to think of it, there was something odd about these two. They were far enough away that Jak couldn't make out much, but the armor on the leading scout was scuffed and battered, far dirtier than Jak was used to seeing. Usually each Watcher commander made sure that their soldiers had the best, polished armor. It was part of the Watchers' look, one thing among many that set them apart.

And the second figure, he was odd too. You didn't usually see a non-Watcher on patrols like this. Perhaps he was some sort of civilian leader? Or a priest like that piece of filth she had left back in Skyecliff. But no, he didn't exactly look the part either. In fact, he looked almost frightened. His hooded and covered face kept whipping this way and that, as though looking for signs of pursuit. Definitely not typical behavior for a Watcher patrol.

That was when she saw it. As the hooded man's head turned in her direction, she caught the faintest glimpse of his eyes beneath the hood. And even in the morning light, she could see something unusual about those eyes. They glowed a bright, golden color.

“Hang on,” she said aloud, and with more volume than Girwirt was comfortable with.

“Quiet, giant. You want to get us all killed?” He grabbed her arm as she almost stood upright to get a better look at the pair ahead of them. The Watcher was a woman, with short brown hair and a tall build. Yes, Jak recognized the Watcher after all, underneath all that dirt.

“Don’t call me giant, Girwirt. And let go of my arm. I know these two.”

Girwirt stammered as she stood and took a few steps forward, to the other side of their little brush.

“Skellig!” She called out as loud as she dared. Both figures whirled on her, and the Watcher threw up her hands, igniting flames in both of them. Skellig was a Flamedancer. “It’s me!” Jak said, putting both arms out in a gesture of innocence. “It’s Jak.”

“Jak?” Skellig called out. “What in the blazes are you doing here!” She put out the fire in her hands and began walking in Jak’s direction, followed by the hooded figure. Jak couldn’t see who was under that hood, but she had a decent guess.

“I’m investigating a few leads,” Jak said, not wanting to get too specific.

“So are we.” Skellig and Jak met and shook hands, though Skellig quickly pulled Jak into an embrace. She was surprised by the unusual show of affection from the former Watcher Major, but hugged her back all the same.

“Hello, Jak.” It was the cloaked figure, who gently reached up, removed his hood, and unwrapped a cloth surrounding his face. His exposed skin shone like the sun.

Jak smiled. “Hello Yewin.”

Her Bright Fae friend inclined his head. “It’s nice to finally see you again.”

“Dragons and diddlesniggers!” Jak winced as Girwirt finally emerged from his hiding spot. “It glows! Ain’t never seen something like that before. Hey giant, it glows.”

Skellig put a hand to her waist where her sword lay, her other hand poised to spout flame again. Yewin tensed, but cocked his head after getting a good look at the gnome. Jak raised one hand to calm them both. “It’s okay, he’s with me.”

“What is he?” Skellig said, relaxing her shoulders. “Some new kind of Fae?”

Girwirt scowled. “I swear, the next time someone says that word...”

“He doesn’t like being called that.” Jak clarified. “His name’s Girwirt, and his people are called gnomes. And apparently there’s

another kind called dwarves that live in the mountain.”

Yewin stepped forward and offered a hand to the small gnome. His hand, like the rest of his body, was covered so as to keep in the glow. Girwirt stared at the hand sideways, but took it eventually. “I’m very pleased to meet you, Master Girwirt. My name is Yewin. I’m a Bright F...uh being like yourself. My people rule over light and truth. What is your domain?”

The gnome seemed taken aback by Yewin’s formality, leaning back slightly from Yewin whilst still connected by the handshake. When he didn’t respond immediately, Jak spoke up. “Fire, or at least heat of some kind. I’m not sure I understand it yet.”

“Well, you’ve certainly had some adventures, Jak,” Skellig said, taking a good look at her. “I thought you were studying in Skyecliff.”

“I don’t know if we have time to tell you everything now. Girwirt is leading me into the mountain. Besides, our voices could attract a real Watcher patrol if we’re not careful.”

“You’re going in alone?” Skellig raised one eyebrow.

“I think that the fewer we have, the less chance of getting caught,” Jak replied. She wondered again why Skellig and Yewin were here. They weren’t planning on entering the mountain too, where they? “Just why are you here?” she said.

“Well I was discharged from the garrison at Foothold.” said Skellig “It...wasn’t amiable. They would have brought me to Skyecliff for a completely unlawful court martial if I hadn’t escaped and made my way here. A few of the Shadow Fae spies mentioned the queen’s interests here, and the possibility of more Fae. I decided to investigate. And Yewin insisted on accompanying me, even though he doesn’t exactly blend in.”

“Yep,” said Girwirt. “That’s what glowing will do for you. Wouldn’t last a day inside a dark mountain like this one.”

Skellig glanced at the Gnome. “I suppose you know another way of getting in? The main entrance is completely blocked off.”

“Hold on,” Jak cut in. “We can’t all go, that’s far too many. And Girwirt is right, Yewin would give us all away. No offense, Yewin.”

“None taken.” Yewin inclined his head to her. “I’ve been working on that though. It appears I can control the light around me to a small degree. Like so.” He frowned his face in concentration, and the light around him faded somewhat, though not completely. Jak could still see a slight glow surrounding his face. Yes, it might help, but in the near complete darkness of being under a mountain, even the slightest source of light could give them away.

“I’m sorry, Yewin, but we can’t risk it,” she said.

“We’ve come this far.” Skellig cut in. “And I’ve been a member of the Watchers for a long time. I may be able to convince some of them

to come to our side, which I see as the best chance we have of liberating anyone. We're not leaving."

"But..."

"It's not exactly up to you, Jak. I'm sorry." Skellig had that formal, military look to her again. "You can let us accompany you, or we'll follow your trail once you leave. You know I was the best tracker in Kuldain's camp."

Jak let her shoulders slump. It was stupid. They knew that, why were they pushing?

"I'm sorry, Jak," said Yewin, noticing her discomfort. "But there is just too much to learn here, from these...erm gnomes as you call them, and to find out what these Watchers are up to. My people are fragile and we need every advantage we can get. There is much these people could teach us about what we are becoming."

Jak glanced at Girwirt, who was looking at Yewin again, his eyes still wide. "What do you think, Girwirt?"

"Don't look at me," he said. "Just long as they don't get in my way, they can come."

Jak let her breath out in a long sigh. She had been hoping that Girwirt might take her side. Wasn't he just as scared to travel with more people and potentially get caught? "Fine. You can come with us, but Yewin, you need to be completely covered once we're inside. One of us will guide you if you can't see." If any of them could see at all.

"That is acceptable." Yewin nodded.

Jak still didn't like it. Even if Yewin didn't stick out like a bad brand, there were four of them now, and four were a lot easier to catch than two, or better yet, one. Even with Skellig's skill as a Flamedancer and a warrior, or Yewin's Fae abilities to manipulate light, they'd be like waves crashing against Skyecliff's cliffs if it came to a confrontation against this many Watchers.

And there was something else that bothered Jak. Something called to her from that mountain. She didn't know what it was, but it was almost familiar to her, like the voice of her father or mother. Not a bad feeling, but there *was* something dark about the mountain too. And that's what frightened Jak most.

Weeks before in Skyecliff, she had nearly died, and in those moments she communicated briefly with a dark force, far more powerful than anything Jak had previously experienced. That dark force took the shape of Doran, a blacksmith she had first met in Foothold, and he told her that he had business in the south-eastern mountains. It could have only meant Mt. Harafast.

Jak just hoped the cold, sinking feeling in her stomach was only her nerves, and not something more ominous. It only grew as they approached the mountain.

“C

areful,” said Girwirt as they climbed a faint trail on the side of Mt. Harafast. The peak towered above them, far larger in person than Jak had thought possible. “Disturb any of the rocks and someone might look up.”

They hadn’t seen any new Watcher patrols in the hour or so since they started climbing the mountain. Skellig, with her knowledge of Watcher movements, had managed to keep them clear of the patrols before then. But now, even though the Watchers didn’t patrol this high up the mountain, Jak felt exposed. All it would take was one Watcher to get a good look at their little corner of the mountain, and he or she might spot them.

“How much further, Girwirt?” she asked. They had been traveling uphill for what felt like forever.

“Not far,” Girwirt whispered. He had grown increasingly quiet and twitchy since their approach. Something clearly agitated the gnome, and it wasn’t just his typical non-caring attitude that seemed off to Jak. He was constantly snapping at them to be quiet. She hadn’t known Girwirt for very long, but just that small change in behavior was enough to make her tense.

They kept walking for a time, eventually rounding the mountain on the west side. That made Jak feel a little better, as they were no longer within eye-shot of any Watchers on the ground. That creeping dread in her stomach had not stopped, but only grew as she approached the secret entrance Girwirt led them too.

“Here,” said Girwirt, finally. “This is the entrance.”

He cleared some brush and plant life and Jak was shocked to see that a hollow tube of some kind lay beyond it. The rock was almost completely smooth, and circular, though small enough that everyone besides Girwirt would have a tough time squeezing through. What really puzzled Jak, though, was the warm air coming from the hole.

“You’re sure we’ll all be able to get inside?” Skellig asked, ducking closer to get a better look.

“You’re the ones that wanted to come, not me,” said Girwirt. Yet

despite his claims to the contrary, Jak couldn't help but notice his longing gazes down the hole. It may have been occupied by Watchers, but this mountain was his home. Jak smiled at Girwirt while he wasn't looking. Someone was clearly happy to be home.

"We'll fit," she said. "Just as long as it doesn't get any more narrow as we go along. Girwirt?"

"Nah, it's like this all the way down," said Girwirt. He placed himself at the front of the entrance and partially inside.

"Good, then we won't have any trouble." She glanced at Skellig, who still looked uneasy. She was easily the largest of the four of them, and looked none-too-comfortable about the idea. Perhaps she'd forget about why she was here and decide to leave instead? That would sure make Jak's job easier.

"Lead the way, my friend," Yewin said, already ducking down to follow the gnome inside the hole. His action must have prompted Skellig, whose mouth tightened and then she too approached and ducked into the entrance.

Jak sighed. Well there was no getting around it. She was going to have company in this mountain. She only hoped that they could take care of themselves enough to keep from ruining Jak's goals. Setting her shoulders, Jak became the last one to enter the tunnel.

It didn't take long for almost complete darkness to overshadow them all, though as Jak suspected, a small light streamed out of Yewin's eyes ahead of her. As her eyes adjusted, she could make out the tunnel ahead of them using nothing but the light coming out of Yewin's hood. It was useful now, but she hoped that light didn't give them away later.

In all honesty, she wasn't exactly sure what Skellig and Yewin hoped to gain here. Jak at least had an idea. She knew there were Fae enslaved in the mountain, and that could not be tolerated. But if what Girwirt told them was true, they wouldn't have much chance of freeing them. Not without a plan and a lot of luck. And they couldn't form a plan without getting a sense of the situation first. That was one reason why they needed to enter the mountain.

The other reason, the one only Jak knew, was that according to her mentor, Gabriel, there was a Pillar of Eternity hidden somewhere in this mountain. She hadn't asked Girwirt about it yet, fearing that he might not want to take her inside if he knew her real intentions. Perhaps he didn't care, or didn't even know about the Pillar's existence, but she didn't want to risk the chance of being turned away.

She ducked her head further in a particularly narrow part of the tunnel. Her neck was beginning to ache from being bent over this whole time. But she quickly put that out of her mind by continuing her thoughts on the Pillars of Eternity.

She was sure the Pillar must be hidden in this mountain. It was the most plausible explanation for why there were Fae here too. And while Girwirt claimed that the dwarves and gnomes had lived here for generations, and hadn't transformed as the other Fae had done, she wasn't so sure. The Pillars of Eternity, all three of them, had been lost for centuries, perhaps longer. They were nothing but a myth now. But the magic of a Relic of that scope could have been what changed the Fae in these mountains, even if it was so long ago that none of them could remember.

And besides, she could feel something calling to her. Not the darkness that she also felt causing a growing knot in the pit of her stomach, but something else as well. Now that she was closer, she thought she recognized the feeling. It was a lot like how she felt around the other, more powerful Relics, like the ones that created the Shadow and Water Fae.

Skellig almost slipped in front of her. There was moisture on the walls and floor of the tunnel, and the warm air was gradually getting warmer.

"Why is this tunnel so smooth and round?" Jak quietly asked Girwirt who led the three of them at the front. He was the only one standing upright and looking right at home.

"This is a lava tube," Girwirt said, so calmly that Jak almost didn't register his words. When she did, she stopped in her tracks.

"You're telling me that...lava came through this passage?" Suddenly the air felt much hotter and Jak began to sweat.

"Oh it's nothing to worry about," Girwirt said. His voice seemed a lot less depressed than before, and there was a skip in his step. "This mountain hasn't been active in hundreds of years. Not since the dragon began his slumber."

"You've mentioned that creature before," said Yewin. "What exactly is it?"

Jak listened in. She had also heard Girwirt mention a "dragon" but had never heard the word uttered before. Not even her father, who knew all sorts of things, had ever mentioned such a creature, if it even was a creature.

"Stupid giants, they don't know anything," Girwirt said softly. Did he know that they could hear him when he spoke like that? But before Jak could open her mouth to protest, Girwirt continued. "Dragons are great beasts that live in the heart of mountains. They love volcanic mountains the most. Legend has it that one lives here, somewhere. But it's been asleep for centuries."

"So...you've never seen it?" Jak kept her hands on the side of the tunnel to keep herself from slipping. She was really starting to sweat now, and the humidity in the air really made the smooth sides of the

tunnel slippery.

“Of course not,” said Girwirt. “It’s a silly tale for young gnomes, to keep them from wandering off.” He adopted a mock serious voice. “Because if you do, the dragon will eat you alive and bury you in its lair of lava.”

That made Jak feel better at least. “So is there any lava left in the mountain?”

“Yes, there’s a large pool of it at the other end of this tunnel.” Girwirt said. Again he seemed completely okay with the fact that they were approaching a large body of rock that was so hot it melted. “But it’s done nothing but sit there for as long as any gnome can remember. It’s the source of everything we do here.”

“What do you mean, the source?” asked Skellig, who had remained quite up till now.

“It gives us energy, light, power. Most importantly it helps us in our forging process. The warmth also makes it possible to grow food. Not to mention it keeps the whole mountain warm.”

A little too warm in Jak’s opinion. She wiped her brow again to take off the sweat. Yewin kept inquiring. “So it’s basically the centerpiece of your civilization.”

“Yeah sure, whatever,” said Girwirt.

“And I assume, from the moisture in the air, that you must have a water source of some kind.”

“Yeah, an underground stream, runs not far from the pool of lava.”

“I’m amazed,” said Yewin. “You truly have a great setup here. Apart from the Watcher occupation, that is.”

“Right, apart from that,” said Girwirt. He went quiet all of a sudden, and while Jak couldn’t see his face ahead of her, she guessed that he was probably sulking again. She couldn’t blame him. She wouldn’t want her home to be occupied by Watchers. Though come to think of it, that’s almost exactly what happened. Just without the enslaving bit.

“We’re almost there,” said Girwirt, and Jak could not have been more relieved to hear him say that. Her neck and back were already in a lot of pain from walking bent over.

Though her relief quickly turned to apprehension as she saw a soft glow in the distance. This wasn’t the bright, yellow glow of Yewin’s eyes, but a deeper red glow. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know what made that kind of light.

But within minutes, she got to lay eyes on its source. Her fingers, that had been trailing along the sides of the tunnel, suddenly grasped at air. They were at the end of the tunnel. They had to scramble down a steep slope after leaving the tunnel, and when Jak turned to see where they’d come from, she realized why this entrance was secret.

From down below, even with the dim light, she could barely see anything there.

“Cover your eyes,” whispered Girwirt to Yewin. He obliged and the light coming from inside his hood winked out. Skellig took his arm to guide Yewin, now that he could not see. But Jak could still make out her surroundings from the faint glow of...something ahead of them.

They were in a cavern, a huge cavern. Jak could barely make out the ceiling above them, but she couldn’t see how far back it went. There were large columns of rock extending from the ceiling and rising from the floor beneath them, looking like naturally forming pillars like Jak had seen in the giant cathedral in Skyecliff. The warm glow came from beyond the pillars.

Jak gazed at the stone columns. She didn’t see any markings on them, but could the Pillars of Eternity be like these? They were certainly grand enough to fit her perception of what a grand Relic would look like. But if so, how would she move them? Were the Pillars even meant to be moved, or were they permanent structures?

Girwirt brought her out of her thoughts. Like before, he was whispering. “There are soldiers close. Follow me, I know a place we can hide.”

He led them around the huge stone pillars, and Jak had to wrench her gaze away from them. Once around them, she got her first glimpse of what caused the red glow.

A giant pool of lava lay several hundred feet ahead of them. Even at this distance, Jak could feel the heat radiating outward from its surface. It was amazing that they weren’t all cooked where they stood. She supposed there must be other vents like the one they came through, but she couldn’t imagine what that heat must feel like up close.

“That’s Dragon Lake,” said Girwirt, pausing to see what everyone was looking at. “It’s the pool of lava I told you about.”

Movement caught Jak’s eye. There were people close to the lava pool, of various sizes. She couldn’t quite make out what they were doing, but she could clearly see that some towered over the others. Those had to be the Watchers. And the shorter ones had to be gnomes like Girwirt, or maybe some of these dwarves he talked about.

“Keep moving,” whispered Girwirt. “There are patrols looking for stragglers and runaways. They’ll find us eventually if we stay put, and believe me, you don’t want to know what happens to the ones they catch.”

They all did as ordered, without saying another word, following Girwirt away from the pool of lava and into the darkness.

# I

It was strange, being in complete darkness. Jak was reminded of the time when she'd entered an entirely different cave, where the Shadow Fae dwelt. She'd been in total darkness then too. But something here felt different. More...stifling. Maybe it was the humidity and warmth, which they could still feel even long after they lost sight of the "Dragon Lake" as Girwirt called it.

They didn't say anything either, on Girwirt's recommendation, as any unnecessary sounds could bring the Watchers on them. Jak was particularly aware of the creaks of her new armor rubbing against itself. Skellig was even worse, since she wore a lot more plate than Jak did. Girwirt kept hushing both of them as they went, to the point that Jak felt she had to freeze everything but her legs to keep from making any sound.

Girwirt was completely silent otherwise, and so was Yewin. Since his entire body was covered to keep out the glow, he couldn't see. But then again, none of them could right now. Instead, they formed a chain with Skellig keeping an arm on Girwirt, and Yewin and Jak following behind. This really would have been a lot easier with just her and Girwirt. But Jak pushed back her annoyance.

Suddenly, she felt herself bump into Yewin, who drew up short behind Skellig and Girwirt. "Quiet." Girwirt hissed for the hundredth time. Then a knocking sound echoed faintly around them. It sounded like Girwirt was knocking on some kind of stone, but not a completely solid stone. Girwirt knocked twice, then three times, then once more. It must have been some kind of secret code. Were there other people around? Despite the darkness, Jak found herself moving her head left and right to catch a glimpse of...well she didn't really know what.

"Noralim," Girwirt whispered. "It's me, Girwirt."

A pause, then a voice answered. "Girwirt, we thought you were killed at the lake! Who's with you? We could hear them coming a mile off."

"They're friends," said Girwirt. "They helped me escape and come here."

There was another pause, and Jak thought she heard faint muttering coming beyond the stone door. Then the speaker, Noralim, spoke again. "Some of the others are worried that the giants have forced you to reveal our location."

Jak could almost feel Girwirt roll his eyes. "If that was the case why would I even bother knocking?"

Another pause, and then finally, the stone door ground against more stone as it opened. Jak had to blink as the light of a few fires stung her eyes. They had grown used to the blackness. When she could see again, she caught the glint of firelight on several pairs of eyes that stared back at her.

The little people exited and surrounded them. A few held makeshift weapons in their hands, and they waved them at Jak's party, indicating they should go inside. They didn't look very friendly about it.

Girwirt simply raised his hands, seemingly unconcerned, and walked through the stone entrance. Jak and the others followed, albeit gingerly. Girwirt did know what he was doing, right?

The stone door swung close with a grinding crunch. Only once they proceeded down a stone hallway into a well-lit room full of stone benches did they stop to talk.

What interested Jak most was that the lights around the room weren't torch like, but coming from large spikes of what looked like white-hot metal, embedded in stone chalices of some kind around the room. Warmth flowed from them in addition to the light. But how did they stay hot like that? It had to be something to do with the abilities possessed by the gnomes.

"Girwirt!" One of the shadowy figures in front of Jak reached over and embraced the small gnome in a crushing hug. It was the same voice that had spoken to them from inside the stone door. "I was so worried about you. We didn't know if you were alive or dead."

"I'm...alive, Noralim." Girwirt wheezed out through the hug, though he sounded in that moment as though he wished he weren't. "Put me down!"

When Noralim finally compiled, Girwirt swayed for a moment on the spot, then waved at Jak, Skellig, and Yewin. "You don't have to worry about this lot, even if they are giants. They say they're here to help, though so far I've been helping them a lot more than they helped me."

"I rescued you," Jak said indignantly.

"Yeah, well I led you to the mountain, showed you the secret entrance, and brought you, literally by the hand, to our most secret of secret resistance hideouts. I think that tips the balance in my favor."

Jak wasn't sure she fully agreed, but before she could say so,

another of the figures spoke up. It was a woman's voice.

"Why is that one all covered up?" she said, pointing at Yewin. The Bright Fae still kept his face hidden, and probably for the best. Revealing his face right now, with no explanation, might just get them kicked right back out of the hideout.

"Aw..." said Girwirt. "Yes, now that one will need a bit of explaining. We've got a lot to talk about."

Jak let the gnome do most of the talking. She passed the time while he explained his side of the story observing the others in the room. Some had flaming red hair like Girwirt, but others were different. They were short, but not as short as the gnomes. And they were stockier, and many had large, bushy beards that they stroked while they listened to Girwirt's tale. Those had to be the dwarves Girwirt had told them about earlier. Noralim was one of them, though his beard was shorter and a light brown. And his cheeks held a rosy quality and a smile. The wrinkles around his eyes suggested he smiled a lot.

A few spared nervous glances for Jak as Girwirt talked, some more than others, clearly distrustful of the "giants" no matter what they had done to help one of their own. And when the gnome explained his meeting with Skellig and Yewin, they scrambled off their seats and reached for makeshift weapons of stone as the Bright Fae uncovered his face, revealing the glowing visage within.

"Sit down," Girwirt said, waving them down in annoyance. "This one is harmless. In fact, he's not very useful here anyway."

Yewin shot him a glance at that, but held his tongue. He had always been far more patient with people than Jak could ever be. Though secretly, Jak agreed with Girwirt.

"So why are they here?" Asked Noralim, the dwarf that had first greeted them.

"We're here to help," Jak said, cutting in for the first time. All heads turned to look at her, including Yewin and Skellig.

"You?" one of the other gnomes raised its eyebrows at her. "You're a small girl, even for giant standards. What makes you think you can stand up to all those Watchers. This one looks capable." He waved a hand at Skellig. "But you have to admit, three of you against hundreds of them. You're either mad or...well, mad."

"That one is more capable than she looks," said Girwirt. Jak turned to listen. Girwirt had never said anything positive about her before. Most of the time he had complained, spouting some of the same rhetoric that his companion had just mentioned. "You didn't see her take down those Watchers that kidnapped me. One could spout flames, and another could lift things with his mind. And she defeated them all."

Jak wanted to say something about how it wasn't a big deal, but forgot her words as all eyes were on her again. Skellig, in particular, was looking at her in a new light, her brows furrowed in confusion.

"How?" Skellig asked. "Even I would be hard pressed to take out a Telekinetic. It's possible, but not if there were others present. And your brand is Gifting. I know you learned quickly under Naem's instruction, but..." She let her unfinished question hang in the air.

Jak grimaced. Girwirt knew about her multiple brands, but he'd wisely kept that a secret from the others for now. She'd hoped that Skellig and Yewin would have moved on by now, and she wouldn't have to tell them. Oh well, so much for that.

She unstrapped some of the leather armor off her arms, then rolled up her sleeves to expose the Flamedancer, Healing, and Strength brands.

A few oos and ahs sounded among the group of gnomes and dwarves, but the biggest reaction came from Skellig and Yewin, who both rose to their feet. Yewin lost the rest of his cloak, exposing more of his skin and filling the room with light, causing everyone else to shield their eyes. It made the whole situation seem far more dramatic than Jak had intended.

"You figured it out," said Yewin. He had been one of the few present when Jak had first given someone multiple brands. He had been the one to help her do it through a link that Jak still did not understand. She wished she could establish that link again, but it had almost killed Yewin at the time.

"Figured what out?" Skellig's mouth was open and she was staring first at Jak, then at Yewin. "You're saying you knew something about this?" Turning back to Jak she added. "And why would you keep a secret like this from us?"

Jak shrugged. She couldn't tell them that she had secretly hoped they would leave. "It never came up," she said eventually.

"Never came up? Never..." Skellig stopped in mid-sentence, finally noticing the gnomes and dwarves, who were looking at her and Jak with peaked interest, their small heads moving in unison to stare at either Skellig or Jak as each spoke.

"Perhaps we could get back to the important topics," Girwirt said dryly. "So she has a bit more magic than you. Big deal."

"Big deal?" Skellig looked like she was about to explode. "Do you have any idea how many people have tried and failed to do what she's done? No one can have more than one brand. No one. It just isn't possible!"

"I've seen one," Noralim spoke up.

Jak's head snapped to face the dwarf. "What do you mean?"

Girwirt shuffled his feet. "Noralim, is it really wise...?"

“Of course it is.” Noralim was surprisingly cheery, his red cheeks swelling with a smile. “If this girl is like that man, than maybe she’s meant to help us.”

“But she’s just a young one,” Girwirt shot back.

“Well, then why did you bring her here? Do you mean to say you haven’t told her about him?”

“About who?” Jak interjected, feeling impatience rise. “You have to tell me now.”

Noralim raised his eyebrows at Girwirt, who waved a hand in defeat. “Fine, go ahead and tell her.

Noralim faced Jak. “There’s a man who leads the Watchers here. He’s not very nice.”

Jak nodded. That was normal enough. “And are you saying this man has multiple brands, like me?” The only other person besides her and Naem that she had ever seen with multiple brands was Kuldain, and he had been a shapeshifting demon, and a leader of the Watchers before Jak killed him. Could this be another man like him?

“Yes, and no. He walks about looking like the rest of them, with only one of your markings on his hand. But I saw him once. He grew so enraged when a plan of his did not work out. If he had known I was watching, he would have killed me on the spot. But he didn’t, and I saw other markings on his face and hands. Hundreds of little lines.”

Skellig was eyeing Jak knowingly. She also knew about Kuldain, and had seen a similar transformation when the former Watcher colonel turned into his demon form. Kuldain had multiple lines covering his body as well. Yewin was clutching his chin, deep in thought.

“So what do you know about this man?” Jak asked, bringing her attention back to the others. She glanced at Girwirt. “And why didn’t you want to tell me about him?”

“He’s trouble, giant,” said Girwirt, surprisingly sober. “He’s killed dozens of us trying to get what he wants.”

“And what exactly is that?” Jak asked. Could it be this man was looking for the Pillars of Eternity as well?

“No one knows,” said Noralim. “He regularly brings some of our number to the Dragon Lake, and tries to link with us.”

Yewin started. “Link?” he asked suddenly. “Your kind can link?”

“Of course we can,” said Girwirt. “We’ve done it for centuries. You can’t?”

“No, I mean, yes I can. But I’ve only ever done it once.” He turned to Jak. “With her. But it nearly killed me.”

“Yes,” Noralim laced his fingers together. “Until you humans arrived we thought everyone could link. We do it all the time between gnomes and dwarves. It gives us a sort of understanding that allows us

to craft most excellent things.”

“That’s how you’ve managed to make those weapons and armor,” Jak said, everything clicking. “I’ve never seen such craftsmanship.”

“Yes, thank you.” Noralim’s cheeks grew redder. “But we honestly didn’t know others couldn’t do it until your Watchers came. Their leader tries to link with us whenever he can. But it doesn’t work with him. It kills those who he forces to do it.”

Everyone in the room fell silent, and the dwarves and gnomes stared at the ground. Jak didn’t know what to say. “I’m sorry,” she said at last. “I’ll try to help if I can.” She had defeated Kuldain before. Perhaps she could deal with this leader as well. But then, why was that dread still hanging in her stomach? And then there was that man she’d seen in a vision, Doran. She knew he was here somewhere as well. Could he and this Watcher leader be the same person?

“He’s the reason we started this resistance,” Girwirt said after another sober pause. “We wouldn’t mind all the work they make us do. We enjoy it, linking with our brothers and sisters and performing good work is what we would do anyway. But what he does. Well, we had to do something. They caught me trying to smuggle a few of us out. Usually there’s only one fate for deserters. Their leader makes us link, and we die. That’s what I assume they did with the others, but they kept me for some reason. Said they needed someone to bring to their queen, whoever that is.”

“Believe me,” said Jak. “Death wouldn’t have been much worse.”

“How many of your kind live in these mountains?” Skellig cut in. She was leaning forward on her stone stool, her arms resting on her knees. “Is there any chance of rising up against the Watchers?”

Many of the gnomes and dwarves began shaking their heads. Jak frowned. Many almost looked...defeated.

“There are many of us,” said Noralim. “But we have no skills in fighting. And the tunnel you arrived through is our only way out apart from the main entrance, which is guarded by nearly a hundred of their soldiers.”

Skellig was looking down at the ground, deep in thought. But she looked troubled. Her brow was furrowed and one hand covered her chin. “I understand. Any losses on your side would be severe.”

“They keep us weak, too,” said another dwarf. “Barely a single mushroom a day. They keep the rest for themselves.”

This was disgusting. Fury boiled in Jak’s blood. Here were some helpless Fae being starved, worked to death, and probably beaten. And no one seemed to think they could do anything about it. Even Skellig.

“What about their leader?” Jak asked. “If we eliminate him, wouldn’t the rest scatter? It would give us an opportunity at least.”

Girwirt was shaking his head. “You haven’t seen him in action, young giant. He’s powerful.”

“I think she has a good idea though,” said Noralim. “Though some have tried. They always end up caught and forced to link with the man.”

“They didn’t have someone like me,” said Jak, feeling a surge of unexpected confidence. She was going to help these Fae if it was the last thing she did. The Pillar of Eternity, if it really resided here, could wait.

“I want to see this man for myself.”

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ome of them took convincing, but eventually Noralim agreed to take Jak as close to the Dragon Lake as they dared to go. Provided Yewin with his glowing skin remained behind, and Skellig as well. Jak secretly agreed with that decision. The more people, the greater their chance of being discovered. She'd have gone alone if it weren't for the familiarity that the dwarves and gnomes had of the mountain. And if her suspicions about this Watcher leader were correct, she might know who he is, and he was at least as dangerous as Kuldain, perhaps more so.

In the end it was just her, Noralim, and Girwirt, though the latter had only begrudgingly agreed to help. Despite all his complaints, Jak could tell the small gnome took interest in what she did. She often caught him looking at her, though he would glance away the moment she met his eyes. Something about her intrigued him, but she didn't know what. It wasn't any kind of romantic interest. Or at least, she hoped not.

"My full name is Noralim Paddyfoot," said Noralim as they walked in darkness. "What's yours?"

Jak trailed behind him, with one hand on his shoulder and the other stretched out around her. "Jagniteksnewodheghoma," she pronounced her full name. "My core name is just Jak."

"Dragons and dung beetles," Noralim said. "That's a dazzlingly long name. Do you not have a surname?"

"A what?"

"A surname. Mine is Paddyfoot."

"You mean you have two names?"

"Yes, one is my own, the other is of my clan."

"I guess that's kind of how it works for us," Jak said, though she didn't say more as she nearly stumbled in the darkness. They had to be close to the Dragon Lake, right?

"They're both silly," said Girwirt. "We gnomes stick with one name. And a simple one too. No hassle. No pressures to be a part of any clan or some such nonsense."

Noralim spoke up again. "You'll have to excuse my friend. He's a lot more cynical than I am."

"It's...okay," Jak said, nearly stumbling again. "I know he doesn't mean it." If she could have seen the gnome, she would have winked at him. Right now she could just imagine his pouting face.

Girwirt grumbled something under his breath that Jak couldn't make out. But in that moment she found herself distracted by a warm light ahead. They must be approaching the lake of lava.

"Keep your voices down now," Girwirt whispered. "There will be soldiers about."

Together they crept closer and closer to the warm light. Rounding a bend in the tunnel, Jak could tell they were suddenly in that huge cavern that they had entered originally. She could see Dragon Lake now, glowing brightly not far ahead of them and to the right. This time, though, several torches flickered nearby, undoubtedly lit by the Watchers. They were attached to long polls that surrounded the lake and led up a passageway on the opposite side.

With the added light of the torches, Jak could finally make out some people. Tall figures stood at the ready, with what looked like spears in hand. The firelight glinted off their armor, spraying bits of light in all directions. Those had to be the Watchers.

Noralim was waving at her now. She glanced at him. "This way," he said as quietly as he could manage. "I know a place where we can hide until the leader gets here. It won't be long before he comes. He always attempts the link around the same time each day."

Jak wanted to ask Noralim how he knew what time it was. There was no way to see the sun from in here. But she thought better about it. Best not to make any sounds while they were this close to the Watchers.

They followed Noralim to a large rock. They were on the opposite side of the lake from the Watchers. There were no torches on this side, but Girwirt grumbled something about patrols, and Jak suspected that even here, they were in danger of being discovered. So they made no sound, and Jak leaned against their rock, peeking her head around to look at the Watchers, keeping as still as she possibly could.

They stood there for several minutes. It was hard to tell how much time had passed. But it wasn't long before Jak saw movement. Several Watcher guards were dragging two figures down a torch-lit passage down to the edge of the Dragon Lake. Judging by their height, the two figures had to be dwarves or gnomes.

Then a tall man stepped out of the darkness to meet them, materializing immediately from the shadows near the lake. How had Jak not noticed him standing there before?

"That's him," said Girwirt in a harsh whisper.

Even across the lake, with waves of heat distorting her vision, Jak could see the man. He was tall, towering over the other Watchers, and his hair was a bright golden-yellow. He approached the two smaller figures and then waved to the Watchers to bring them closer to the edge of the lake. As he turned to face the lake, Jak got her first good look at his face. And in that moment, her suspicions were confirmed.

The man was Doran. That chiseled jaw framed by the wavy locks of blonde hair confirmed it. She had encountered him on two occasions, once when he had been a blacksmith at Foothold just before the demon attack on that fortress. He had mysteriously disappeared in that instance, and she'd never seen him again. Until several months later when he had appeared to her while she lay bleeding out in a cage. He had revealed himself to her then. He had something to do with the demons, the way they were being controlled. And he was powerful. He hadn't even been physically present when he talked to her, instead communicating across a great distance. Perhaps that was another trait that these super demons like Kuldain had been. She honestly didn't know how much power Kuldain had.

Doran had thought her defeated the last time he spoke to her. He reveled in it. But Jak, it seemed, was more resilient than that.

“Let’s begin!” Doran’s voice echoed across the cavern, but the acoustics made it easy to make out what he said.

The Watchers brought the two figures closer. Jak could now see that each was struggling, and doing everything they could to get free. But the Watchers were far stronger, and they held the captives with little trouble.

This wasn’t good. She had to do something, rescue those two Fae. She couldn’t just let them die at Doran’s hand.

A hand grabbed her leg. She looked down to see Girwirt shaking his head at her. She must have looked like she was about to step out and try to do something.

“Don’t, lass. There’s nothing we can do.”

Jak stared back across the glowing lake of fire. She marked each of the Watchers she could see. There were at least a dozen, in addition to Doran himself. Even at her best there was no way she could take so many. And there was no way she could take on a being like Kuldain without facing him one on one. Girwirt was right, there was nothing she could do.

But she couldn’t just do nothing! She just couldn’t! Yet, helpless as she was, she watched as Doran knelt to talk to the struggling figures. She couldn’t hear what he was saying now, but they stopped struggling. When Doran stood again, she could make out the faces of the two captives. Their heads were hanging in defeat. What had he said to them?

Doran knelt near the lake of fire, so close that Jak wondered how he did not burn. The two captives, led by the Watchers that held them, took several steps forward and placed their little hands on one of Doran's shoulders. Jak wasn't exactly sure how it worked, but she could guess that they were beginning a link. The Watchers holding the two Fae kept their hands in place so that the Fae could not move or break the link.

If only she could close her eyes, not have to witness what would come next. But she couldn't. Her gaze remained fixed on the scene in front of her.

An odd outline of light surrounded the two prisoners. It was almost like the silver lining on a cloud, or when someone stood in front of a fire. By their silhouettes, she could now clearly make out that one was a gnome, and the other was a dwarf. The strange light extended from their arms into Doran, whose head rose in what looked like ecstasy, his eyes closed. For a moment, just a moment, everything looked like it might be alright, like it was working.

The two prisoners spasmed, and that curious light that surrounded them winked out, each of them falling to the ground. Doran's eyes shot open, and he reached out his hands to the burning lake. "No!" he cried. "I almost had it!"

Turmoil broke the otherwise calm surface of the lake of lava. Burning hot rock scattered in all directions, while Doran raised his hands to the lake. Bits of the molten fluid landed on nearby Watchers, who scrambled backward and stripped the pieces of armor that had begun to burn. Jak watched in horror as the clothing of the two captives caught fire. But no one ran to save them, and they did not get up.

"Why. Can't. I. Find it!" Doran was heedless of the chaos he was invoking. He continued to wave his arms, causing the lava to thrash about with what must have been Telekinetic power. A few stray pieces of burning lava landed near Jak, and she fully hid herself behind their rock. Doran was crazy? Why didn't the Watchers see that he was crazy? Or did they fear him as much as the dwarves and gnomes did?

But she had a fairly good idea of what Doran was searching for. She could feel it, now that she was so close. A great power called to her from beneath the lava. Somewhere down there, there was a Relic of great power. Could it even be a Pillar of Eternity? Did she dare hope?

But no, that wasn't something she could concern herself with right now. She had to find a solution for the Fae trapped in this mountain. Doran didn't seem any nearer to obtaining whatever waited beneath the Dragon Lake than she was, and that gave her confidence. Though, if there was a Relic buried there, why couldn't his Telekinetic abilities

recover it?

She put that out of her mind for now. She had seen Doran at work, she had seen how he killed the Fae slaves. And she could not let that happen again. Next time, she would have a plan, some way to save these poor dwarves and gnomes.

But in the same way that she felt a pull from a Relic somewhere beneath the waves of lava, she felt that lingering dread again. But it wasn't coming from the Relic, instead it came from Doran. She hadn't even realized that the source of her dread was based on proximity to a person. How would that even work? But it was true. She could feel it dissipating ever so slightly as Doran retreated with the rest of the Watchers. Though it still hung there like a solid rock weighing her down.

Soon, the Watchers had all retreated and Girwirt signaled that it was probably safe to go back now. They still risked a random Watcher patrol, but most of the danger was gone now.

When they arrived back at the secret Fae hideout, Skellig and Yewin were inside talking to the rest of the dwarves and gnomes. They stood as Jak and her companions entered.

"So?" Skellig said, waiting.

"It's pretty bad," Jak replied. "He's everything they said he would be, and even the Watchers seem a little scared of him. You may have seen him before. Do you remember Doran, the blacksmith?"

Skellig frowned. "Yeah, I remember him, vaguely. Wasn't he among the missing after the attack on Foothold?"

"Yeah, well he's the leader here."

"That seems an unlikely coincidence," said Yewin, folding his arms. "Are you sure it was him?"

"I'm sure. And I'm not surprised either." She then told them the story of what happened to her in Skyecliff, how the Royal Priest had captured and wounded her, then the mysterious visit from Doran, who somehow spoke to her from a great distance away. She ended by telling them how she had saved her own life by branding herself with the three other brands. As she related the story, her mind wandered a bit. Could she give herself even more brands? Doran was clearly a Telekinetic, and likely had more powers as well. Could she possibly imbue herself with Telekinesis too?

And what about these dwarves and gnomes trapped away in the mountain somewhere? She had to find a way to free them. Perhaps with a sufficient distraction, the Watchers might not watch them long enough for them to break out. If only she had Telekinesis and she could move the lava up into the caverns where the Watchers slept, or to the main entrance. Though from everything she knew about Telekinesis, moving all that rock, even in molten form, would be hard

to do.

She would definitely try the Telekinetic brand later, on a few rocks first to see if she could make it stick. But in the meantime, perhaps she could get around the use of telekinesis. Could the Flamedancer brand do anything to influence the lava? It worked on all other forms of fire.

“Well, that settles it,” Skellig stood once Jak had finished her story. “Whoever this man is, he’s dangerous and we don’t know enough about him. We’re going to need help.”

Jak pulled herself out of her thoughts and looked up at Skellig. “What? No. We have to do something to help these Fae, sorry, these dwarves and gnomes. They’re killing more of them every day.”

“Look around, Jak.” Skellig had hand on hips, and adopted a commanding tone that Jak did not like. “We don’t have an army, and it will take no less than that to take this mountain. And given what you’ve told us about Doran, we might need more than an army.”

“But the longer we wait, the more of them will die.” How did Skellig not see that they had to act now?

“I know that, Jak. But there’s nothing we can do about it. Honestly, I’m afraid we have to get help. Perhaps your Shadow Fae friends...”

“But that will take...” Jak let her voice trail off. Everyone was staring at her now, and none of them looked like they were on her side. Yewin was frowning, but he stood next to Skellig, clearly in support of her ideas. And the gnomes and dwarves of the room weren’t meeting her eyes. They clearly thought it was hopeless to stop Doran.

“How can you all just sit here and let this happen?” Jak asked everyone. “Your people are dying.”

“Now wait just one second.” Girwirt’s eyes flashed, and he raised a finger at her. But Noralim stepped up to his friend and put one hand on Girwirt’s arm.

“We do what we can,” said Noralim, sorrow in his eyes. “But the best we can manage is a few of us at a time. Any more and they would take notice and hunt us down.”

“But they’re killing more of you every day.”

“Don’t you think we know that?” Girwirt pushed Noralim’s hand aside. “Do you think we’re just too scared to stand up to these giants? Or that we don’t care that our brothers and sisters are dying.”

Jak wilted. “I’m...of course not. I didn’t think...”

“That’s right, you didn’t think. Well, I for one like this other giant’s idea. In fact, that’s what I should have done in the first place instead of pander footing my way here just to help you inside the mountain. If this one thinks we should get help, and that we can, I say we do it.”

Jak hung her shoulders. Perhaps Girwirt was right, Skellig too. She

still thought a more surgical strike would be more effective and could result in less loss of life. But Skellig did know military strategy far better than she did. And if the other gnomes and dwarves were okay with it, who was she to argue? But she didn't have to like it.

"Alright," she said after a moment's pause. "We can get help."

Skellig nodded. She did not gloat, or thank Girwirt for taking her side. She merely put a hand on Jak's shoulder and moved on to discuss specifics with the others. "We'll sleep here for a while then return when we are rested."

Jak went off on her own then, finding a small stone room. Well, not really a room, more like the stone-cave equivalent of a small closet. There were a number of stone pebbles on the floor. She could work with that. Perhaps the others had their own plan, but that wasn't going to stop her from practicing a Telekinetic brand. Just in case.

“B

roken brands!” Jak cursed as she failed yet again. A small pebble now hung in the air, with no support, a dysfunctional Telekinetic brand etched into its side.

She'd been practicing the brand for hours, using everything she knew about it to help her. But so far, none of her experiments had worked. The pebbles simple floated in mid air, a sign that she had performed the brand incorrectly. Those pebbles would never fall back down to the earth, unless they were destroyed. And unless Jak didn't want to touch the ground again, she had to get this right before she branded herself.

What she really needed now was the library back in Skyecliff. But she couldn't have carried all those books with her. The only book she carried now was the Book of Illadar, a book introduced to her by her friend Seph that held a number of prophecies of the future. Despite a moderate amount of skepticism, Jak had to admit many of those prophecies had come true. But that book wouldn't help her with branding. She needed instructions. Was there a specific way she should imagine the Telekinetic brand, like with a Flamedancer brand? That one required picturing the brand like it was waving back and forth. Hence the name, *Flamedancer*.

“I think I will always find these magics of yours quite fascinating.” Jak looked up to see Noralim Paddyfoot in the small stone doorway to her little alcove.

She picked up another pebble. “I'm honestly surprised that you've never seen them before. You've never encountered my kind before?”

“Never in my lifetime,” said Noralim, taking a seat on the stone floor across from her. “We kept to ourselves in this mountain for years. Generations. We had food, water, warmth, and above all we had our work. I wish you could see it. The city we built. It's overrun with Watchers now.”

“I'm sorry,” said Jak, watching him closely as he talked.

“It's okay,” said Noralim. “All will work out in the end, that's what I always say. Perhaps our ancestors sent you to help us, or to bring us

help at least." He hesitated as he glanced back in the direction where Skellig and Yewin were still conversing with some of the others.

"You don't sound convinced," Jak pointed out.

"Well, it's not that I don't agree with your comrades. But I do appreciate your desires to take immediate action. I just don't know what you or I could do."

Jak leaned forward, forgetting the pebble in her hand. "What if I could create a distraction large enough to keep the Watchers occupied for a while? How many could you get out in that time?" She had been pondering this idea for the last couple of hours while working on the Telekinetic brand.

"Probably several dozen, but how big of a distraction do you mean?"

"Big," Jak said. "But it would need to be soon, while Skellig and the others are sleeping. Could you get the word out?"

Noralim thought on it. "Not all of my brothers and sisters would be capable of escaping. Only those who are on break or working. They are unfettered, but guarded carefully. The rest are locked up in various rooms throughout our city. And the soldiers hold the keys. We can't get to them."

Jak didn't like it. They would have a better chance of getting everyone out if there was a large mob of the Fae trying to escape. The chaos would give them a better chance. But it would have to do. Better to get some out instead of none. Besides, if her plan went as expected, the Watchers might not want to come back anytime soon.

"Okay, but I need to make sure I can do something first. If it doesn't work, none of this will be possible."

"Something to do with your floating rocks?" Noralim asked, staring at those that floated near the ceiling.

"No, I was hoping I could use that, but so far no luck. But I have another idea, and it might just work."

NOT LONG AFTER, Jak found herself out of the hideout and back at the flaming Dragon Lake. The Watchers were gone now, and most of the torches that surrounded the opposing side of the lake had burnt out. The glow of the lake was now the only source of light in the cavern.

Noralim was with her, but he stayed rather silent, intent on watching Jak to see what she would do.

Once again, she felt that strange call to her from within the lava. A powerful Relic lay there, but that was not why she was here. Because in the lava she felt a second awareness, one that she'd missed before, since her focus had been elsewhere. But now she could clearly feel it. It was the sensation she felt around fire. She was aware of it in a way that was only possible for Flamedancers.

This had better work.

Kneeling near the edge of the lake, she raised her arms and reached out to mentally touch the molten lava near her. The surface of the lake quivered and rippled for a moment, before a tendril of hot rock rose from the surface and hung in the air. She had done it. She could control molten rock with her Flamedancer brand.

“Incredible!” Noralim whispered, as he watched her work.

Jak didn’t say anything. She kept concentrating until the tendril of hot rock broke from the surface and formed into a large ball of glowing radiance above their heads. But as she did, the bright light began to fade and Jak felt it become increasingly difficult to hold it up. Being a Flamedancer, she could control it while it was hot, but she’d need to be a Telekinetic to move the rock once it cooled. She had to find a way to keep it hot.

Summoning a small wave of fire, she directed it at the hot rock, and felt her control over the rock increase. With a mental heave, she sent it flying away from her into the darkness beyond. It splattered against a rock, bits of molten earth flying in all directions, but avoiding them.

“Well, that answers that,” said Jak. “I can control the lava.”

“I take it, that’s your plan for a distraction?” said Noralim, still staring at where she had hurled the molten rock.

“Yes, but I need to know everything you do about the tunnels surrounding this place. And everything you know about where the Watchers are based.”



THEY STAYED up through the night, or at least it was night as far as Jak could guess. Skellig and Yewin, and many of the gnomes and dwarves were all asleep. They had been up discussing plans to get help while Jak had been practicing the Telekinetic brand. Noralim gathered a few others and sent them to warn the captive dwarves and gnomes that there might be a chance to escape, and that they would know the opportunity when they saw it.

Jak had Noralim walk her through the layout of the place as carefully as he could, given the time they had. She learned that opposite the lake from them was the main city. That’s where Doran, the Watchers, and everyone else she had seen would have retired to. That city also lay between the lake and the main mountain entrance. That’s where most of the Watchers stayed. The captive dwarves and gnomes, on the other hand, lived and worked closer to the mines, away from the city.

This side of the lake, where their hideout currently resided, was far less developed, and that was by design, Noralim told her. There were many side passages and it was easy to get lost if you didn't know the way. That's why the Watchers tended to stay close to the Dragon Lake. It also allowed for their backdoor entrance through the lava tube that they had used to get in. Only a select few even knew about that tunnel.

That was how they would get everyone out. Jak would distract the Watchers by sending as much molten lava into the underground city where they had set up camp. That would allow the dwarves and gnomes working closer to Dragon Lake a chance to escape when their guards ran to help their comrades in the city. Hopefully.

It wasn't Jak's favorite plan. A lot could go wrong, and it depended on a lot of factors. Plus there was Doran. If he appeared, she would have to fight him and keep up the distraction while she did so.

But it was the best they could do under such circumstances. Besides, if the plan worked, it might actually help Skellig in her plans. They would have a better chance of recruiting help if there were some of the Mountain and Fire Fae with them, or dwarves and gnomes as they liked to be called, to prove that what Skellig claimed was true. The more she could rescue, the better. Then they could find help for the rest.

Jak's eyes itched. She was tired from staying up through the night, but she could deal with it. Together with Noralim, she tiptoed out of the secret hideout, doing their best not to make any noise, so as not to disturb Skellig. As she passed, she felt another stab of annoyance. Why had that woman wanted to come if she was just going to leave now?

Jak would not leave. Skellig hadn't seen what happened to those poor souls at Dragon Lake. How Doran had just used them, how they had willingly submitted to something they knew would likely kill them. When an entire group of people were that defeated, something had to be done. Jak couldn't wait for help, she had to act now. And if Skellig was right, and something did go wrong, so be it. At least she would have done her best.

Noralim went with her as far as the Dragon Lake, then he slipped into the shadow to circle around the lake towards the forges where he would find his comrades. Jak waited several minutes for him to get there, then after a suitable amount of time, she rolled her neck side to side and bounced up and down on her heels to get some blood circulating. She was going to need more power than she had ever used all at once for what came next.

Reaching out with her Flamedancer brand, Jak could feel it burn with a bright light beneath her traveling cloak. It was one of her newer brands, but already one that she used frequently enough to

have some experience with. In fact, she had grown accustomed to each of her new brands far faster than she would have thought possible. Normally it took several years for someone to master a new brand. But Jak had given herself multiple brands, which was something no one had done before. Perhaps having training in one brand strengthened the others as well.

Jak pushed any stray thoughts out of her mind. Right now, she needed every ounce of mental strength she could muster. Reaching out with her Flamedancer brand, she could feel the massive well of heat and energy in the lake in front of her. And then there was that mysterious feeling like something was calling to her, hidden beneath the surface of the lake. Perhaps if her plan worked, she might uncover that as well, and kill two birds with one stone.

With pure strength of will, she lifted as much of the molten hot magma from its place of relative dormancy in the lake. A large wave rose in the air, its heat nearly singing Jak's eyebrows even as far away as she stood.

No sounds reached her ears. There must not have been any Watchers on duty at the moment. Like Skellig and the others at the secret hideout, most were probably sleeping. Well, they wouldn't stay that way for long.

With a massive heave, Jak pushed with all her might, sending the wave of lava towards the opposite shore of the lake. She would have to be fast. Once the lava began to cool, she would lose what control her Flamedancer brand could give her over the rock. Perhaps, with just a bit more mental effort...

She summoned more fire to help keep the rock hot enough to stay in a liquid form. Jak was really starting to sweat now, and not just because of the heat. Summoning fire and moving it were two separate mental disciplines, and doing both at once, especially at this scale, was taking all the willpower she had. Physical endurance was one thing, and she had Strength for that, but mental fortitude was something completely different.

Time to do what she came to do.

With another push, she brought the fiery wave up onto the shore and up the slight incline towards the dwarven city where the Watchers were camped. The lava swept up through the tunnel, past the edges of Jak's vision. Now she would have to use her magic to do the rest. She couldn't see what lay beyond the tunnel, but she could feel the lava move through the cracks and crevices of the mountain. With that awareness, she could push it in the right direction, at least enough to make it to...

Yes! She could feel it. The lava had reached a large opening of some kind, no longer restricted on either side with the tunnel walls.

That had to be the opening to the underground city. The Watchers would see what was happening by now.

She could hear nothing but the soft gurgle of the molten lava, the city was too far away. But the Watchers must have been shouting and running for their lives. Hopefully Noralim was getting the rest of his people and the gnomes out of the forges right now. She hoped so since the lava at the edges of her awareness was cooling. She couldn't feel it like she once could. It would still be hot enough to cause havoc to whomever was camped on the other side of the tunnel, but not enough for Jak to control it. Which meant Jak just had one more thing to do.

Gritting her teeth with one last mental effort, she sent another wave up towards the tunnel leading to the Watcher camp. But this time she didn't sent it through the tunnel. This time she formed what she could into a huge sphere of molten rock. With a mighty push, she sent the sphere flying into the mouth of the tunnel, where it stuck. Finally, Jak pulled what heat she could out of the sphere. The rock lost its light almost instantly as fire flew back towards the lake.

At last, Jak let her mental effort drop. She was sweating all over, and had to take a step back to steady herself. She would definitely need some sleep soon, but her job was done. The Watchers were distracted and they were blocked off from the camp of dwarf and gnome slaves. She stared at the surface of the lake. Despite all the lava she had moved, it still looked to be the same size as before. Something still called to her from beneath the burning pool. But she could see nothing. Fine, she would have to proceed with the plan without the Relic, whatever it was.

There were still the guards at the forges to deal with, but she counted on Noralim and the slaves themselves to help overpower those guards. Jak turned and began running around the lake in the direction of the forges. It was up a side passage that, according to Noralim, eventually became a dead end. The Watchers thought they had trapped the Fae in that tunnel, but they had just made it easier for Jak to send the lava at the Watcher camp whilst leaving the Fae untouched.

Her strength was waning but she did her best to increase her pace. The Fae wouldn't have any weapons, and any remaining Watchers could cause a lot of damage before they were overrun. She had to get there as fast as possible to help.

Sure enough, a commotion sounded up ahead. Something was definitely happening.

She rounded a corner and stepped into another huge cavern. How was it that the inside of a mountain could have such caves?

The entrance was blocked by several dozen Watchers, who stood

shoulder to shoulder with their spears held in front of them. Dozens, no, hundreds of gnomes and dwarves were throwing themselves at the soldiers. Already Jak could see several wounded at the feet of the Watchers. No! She couldn't let any more die.

She was already weak, but she summoned every ounce of remaining strength and hurled a wall of flame at the backs of the Watchers. Caught by surprise, they keeled forward, and some began to scream as bits of hair or clothing caught on fire. Several of the soldiers turned away from the Fae to look at her, and that was their biggest mistake. Dwarves and gnomes threw themselves on the distracted Watchers, knocking them down by sheer numbers.

The Watchers were fighting back with everything they had now. Flamedancers spouted fire at the Fae, but only the dwarves seemed susceptible. Gnomes, or Fire Fae as Jak knew them to be, brushed off the flames like they were nothing. Telekinetics held their own for a while, but even they couldn't stop everyone that piled on top of them, beating them with stones or fists.

Jak caught sight of Noralim, who brandished two small daggers, moving from Watcher to Watcher as they fell. Jak did her best to help. Together, she distracted the Watchers from behind, and the gnomes and dwarves pushed from the front. It wasn't long before all of the Watchers were either dead or unconscious.

In moments the cave went from chaos to silence. Dwarves and gnomes looked from Jak to one another to the Watchers lying on the ground. For a moment, none of them said a word.

"To the back entrance!" Noralim finally shouted. Fae cheered all around them, and all began running past Jak down the stone tunnel. Jak watched them go, but glanced back at the Watchers that still lay on the ground. Weak as she was, it took all her strength not to sink onto the ground next to them.

She looked at their faces. Some were young, barely older than Jak herself. Now many were dead, blood staining their faces. Jak felt a weight press onto her shoulders. She wished it didn't have to be this way. Why did the lives of these men and women need to be traded for the lives of the Fae? Sure, she had just saved more lives than they had killed, and many of these Watchers were only injured and would probably live. But why did any of them have to die? Why couldn't she find a way to avoid it completely?

These Watchers had struck first. That was the only consolation she felt. The dwarves and gnomes were just defending themselves and doing what any normal group of enslaved people would do under such circumstances.

Wiping a few stray tears from her eyes, Jak turned and began trotting back towards Dragon Lake, following the rest of the Fae. Her

effort of using magic had drained the rest of her bodily strength as well. Her legs felt like lead, and her head swam, yet she kept going.

But the image of those dead Watchers still haunted her. And the feeling only seemed to grow as she put distance between her and them, rejoining the Fae by Dragon Lake. They kept running, growing closer and closer to the other side of the Dragon Lake, closer to the lava tube that led out to the surface of the mountain. To freedom. Yet Jak did not feel like celebrating. That haunting feeling would not let her.

Wait a moment, she wasn't feeling bad because of the dead Watchers, not completely anyway. She recognized it now, a familiar dread in the pit of her stomach. She knew that dread.

"Run!" She yelled ahead at the dwarves and gnomes. "He's coming!"

In that moment, the makeshift stone plug Jak had used to seal up the tunnel exploded outward. Bits of rock spewed all over the cavern, and Jak covered her eyes as small bits of stone and dust peppered her body.

Then the dread in her stomach turned to pure fear. The cavern seemed to darken, its walls pressing in around her. Sparks swam in her vision, and her body finally gave into its exhaustion, sinking to her knees and clutching her head while the Fae gained ground ahead of her. She couldn't catch up.

"YOU THINK YOU CAN DEFY ME!" A voice boomed all around them. Jak couldn't see much anymore, couldn't see the dwarves and gnomes ahead of her. The darkness pressed in around her. It was a familiar sensation, one she had experienced twice before in her life. Once on the morning before her village was attacked by demons, resulting in the death of her father. And once more when she had been on the brink of death herself, when Doran had appeared to her.

Whoever Doran was, he was powerful. Perhaps more powerful than Kuldain.

"LET THE LESSONS BEGIN!" The powerful force grew darker, pushing around Jak's body until she felt she might suffocate. Was Doran specifically targeting her, or was everyone else feeling the same sensation? And where were the Watchers? Could they see what their leader was doing? Surely they realized that Doran was not a mere man.

More rock exploded ahead of her. She couldn't see anything now, but she felt the explosion rock the cavern, vibrating the ground beneath her. Then something hit her in the head, and she remembered no more.

“Giant, wake up, giant!”

Jak wanted to keep sleeping. She had been back with her father. She wanted to go back to him.

“Dragons, girl. Get up or I will slap you. Get up!” The voice spoke again in an urgent whisper. An uncomfortable warmth suddenly rushed through Jak’s body and her eyes snapped open! Adrenaline rushed through her, and she would have scrambled to her feet if something hadn’t been weighing her down.

Girwirt stood above her, one hand on her forehead. “Finally! I had to use my magic on you. You know it’s not easy to do that and not burn you to a cinder.”

“I...what happened?” Jak stammered.

“You messed everything up, that’s what. You’re lucky I didn’t fry you on the spot, or leave you here for the other giants to find.”

Memories came back to Jak. They had been about to escape when Doran had arrived and shook the entire cavern. There was still a dim light from Dragon Lake behind her, so she could make out the pile of rocks that partially covered her. She felt a pain in her head and shoulder, and reached up to her temple to feel a large lump there. If it weren’t for her Healing brand, she might have been in much worse shape right then.

“Where is everyone?”

“Dead. Tortured. Who knows?” Responded the gnome in that hushed whisper. “And you need to move if you don’t want to be next.”

With Girwirt’s help, Jak removed the rocks that were pinning her legs down. They ached like they had never ached before, but she could put weight on them. Nothing was broken, thank the ancestors.

“Now stay quiet and let’s see if I can’t lead you out of this mess you made before the Watcher patrols make their way over here.” Girwirt turned and began trotting into the darkness towards the rebel hideout.

Jak scanned the area around her. It looked like the warm light surrounding them wasn’t just from the lake. Several torches lit up

areas of the cavern here and there, held by Watchers on patrol. They were searching. Looking for her?

No, not just for her. Even in the darkness, she could see some of the torches belonged to Watchers with prisoners in tow. Instinctively, she ducked down, though she was far enough from any of the torches that it was unlikely that they could see her. Besides, her clothing was so caked with dust, she probably looked like she was part of the rock wall.

Girwirt led her away from the nearest Watchers, carefully weaving in and out of the rubble. Where had all this rock come from anyway? The last thing she remembered was that mysterious force pressing down around her, and a huge explosion that rocked the cavern. Had that been what scattered this rock everywhere? It was a wonder the whole cavern hadn't come crashing down around them.

She felt a crushing feeling again. Not from that force she had felt, or the weight of rocks, but from the magnitude of her own failure. That feeling was compounded as she passed several bodies crushed under the rocks. The Watchers must be searching for survivors. So where was Doran? She couldn't feel the same dread that seemed to accompany his presence. Well that wasn't exactly true. She could feel it, farther off. And it was moving. Something about being in proximity to Doran helped her feel his presence. He was moving fast, but somewhere else in the mountain.

"Hey Girwirt," she said. "Where's Noralim?"

Girwirt paused and turned to look at her. "They took him. He's probably being interrogated right now, thanks to you. If only they had found you instead." He spat at her, his eyes flaring. Then without another word he turned and continued on his way, not looking back to see if Jak was following.

Yet another weight added to her guilt. What had she gotten them into? It was then that the magnitude of her stupidity really resonated. What made her think it was a good idea to enact a plan when there was so much she didn't know about Doran and the Watchers here? And worse, she had to drag Noralim and the other dwarves and gnomes into it.

Though they had to take several side routes to avoid patrolling Watchers, eventually they were away from the cavern and walking in complete darkness. Jak held Girwirt's hand for the last bit of the journey until they reached the rebel hideout.

When the stone door grated shut behind her, Jak could see Skellig and Yewin standing ahead. Skellig's hands were on her hips, and even Yewin was frowning at her.

Jak braced herself for the rebuke. When at first it didn't come she looked up, meeting Skellig's eyes for the first time.

"I assume you understand the seriousness of what happened?" Skellig said softly. Her tone wasn't aggressive, nor sad. It was a simple statement.

"I do," Jak said. Part of her still felt defiant, like she wanted to tell Skellig that at least she had the guts to try and do something. But she knew that would only make things worse. "I'm sorry," she said finally.

"I appreciate the apology," Skellig said. "But it won't do much to help us now. Watchers know someone is here trying to help these Fae. They won't stop looking until they find us."

"So why don't we just leave?" Jak said. "We'll take everyone here and go get help like you wanted."

Girwirt folded his arms, moving to stand next to Skellig. "Because, stupid, whatever brought down all that rubble also sealed up the secret lava tube. The main entrance is now the only way in or out."

That took a moment to sink in, and once it did, Jak nearly collapsed on the floor. This was her fault, all of it. Skellig had been right, they needed help. And now, because of Jak, more Fae were dead and their only hope of escape was gone. "I'm so sorry," she said finally.

Girwirt snorted, but Skellig still didn't seem angry. And neither did Yewin for that matter, but he didn't look too pleased.

"Well, now we have to figure out a good way to help the Fae slaves," said Skellig, running a hand through her short, brown hair.

Jak met her eyes again. "But, you said we couldn't do that alone?"

"We have no choice now that our exit is compromised." Skellig's eyes were hard as she stared back at Jak. Probably blaming her for what happened.

Jak hung her head. "I'm sorry," she said again. "I'll try to make it up to you."

"No sense looking backward other than to learn from your mistakes. We can't get out, simple as that. And we won't get out the front entrance without creating a sufficient distraction, and I can't think of anything better than what you did earlier. But..."

"Their leader." Jak nodded. "Doran."

"Exactly. Based on the evidence, it seems unlikely that we will be able to leave while he is still around. So he is our number one target."

Jak appreciated what Skellig was trying to do. She was teaching Jak a lesson about failure. Learn from your mistakes but don't let them cripple you going forward. Because that wouldn't do any good in the long run. Jak had learned that lesson a year ago when she had travelled with the Watchers. In her adventures she had been forced to survive, and survival didn't pull any punches for feelings of doubt or self-pity. She wouldn't let those feelings cripple her now.

“Well, I know he’s more than he appears,” said Jak. They all sat on the stone benches and she proceeded to tell Skellig, Yewin, and the other Fae everything she knew.

“My first experience with this man goes back to the day of the demon attack on my village.” Skellig nodded at this. She had been there to rescue the village. Jak continued. “I’m not absolutely certain it was him, but there were similarities in the way I felt that resurfaced later. I woke up and couldn’t move, feeling a weight of some kind pin me down. And I heard a voice asking me if I was ‘the one’ whatever that meant.”

Everyone was listening intently, Skellig in particular. Her elbows sat on her knees as she leaned forward to hear more.

“It was later that day that the demons attacked. Coincidence? Maybe, but perhaps not. I met him again in Foothold, and this time he appeared in the form we all know, pretending to be a blacksmith. I didn’t really like him that much, but had no suspicions of him at the time, though honestly the details of what we talked about are...fuzzy. And the demons attacked Foothold right after I talked to him.”

“Another coincidence?” Skellig asked. “That’s two too many.”

Jak nodded. “I thought the same thing. But like I said, I had no reason to connect Doran to my experience in my home. Or to the demon attack. Anyway, as you know, Doran disappeared after the attack on Foothold. No one saw him go. I figured he was killed in the battle somehow. There were...there were plenty of bodies that were unidentifiable after that battle.” Jak felt a wave of pain that she had not experienced in a long while. Her best friend, Marek, had been among those who died. One of those mangled bodies would have been his.

Skellig’s eyes were knowing, and there was pity there. She waited patiently until Jak shook off her memories of Marek and continued. “The last time I saw him was in Skyecliff. As I’ve told you before, the Royal Priest kidnapped me and stabbed me in the gut. But as I was dying, I had...I guess you could call it a vision or something. I saw Doran, and he talked to me.”

“Dragons save us,” said Girwirt. “He is death itself.”

Jak ignored him. “We spoke and he implied that he was here, by these mountains, yet speaking to me all the way in Skyecliff somehow. He didn’t say much, just revelled in the fact that I was dying. Only after he left did my mother arrive to rescue me, and I branded myself to stave off death. Shortly after, the demons attacked the city, and I’m guessing that wasn’t a coincidence either.”

“Now just what are these demons?” said Girwirt. All heads turned to look at the gnome. He looked from one to another. “What? I’ve never heard of them before now. Some of the giant soldiers out there

called us demons, but I just assumed it was because they didn't like us.”

“You've never heard of demons?” Jak asked. “Mutated humans, perverted by magic? Large teeth and fangs?”

Girwirt's face remained blank. “Nope, can't say I have. You're saying there are giants like you but more unfriendly?”

“Well that eliminates one potential threat?” said Skellig. “If the dwarves and gnomes have not seen any demons, we can assume they probably are not inside the mountain.”

Jak nodded. “He wouldn't need them here anyway. He's got the Watchers, and he's personally overseeing the work here. He's more powerful than any demon.”

“Yes, and that brings me to my next point.” said Skellig. “If we have any chance of fighting this man, we have to know more about what he can do. From the information you gave us, he had some kind of Telekinetic ability, he can also project his mind across long distances, and we have to assume that he can control demons somehow. Have I missed anything?”

Girwirt was shaking his head. “That's more than we've seen. Mostly he just throws stuff around with his mind.”

“His Telekinetic abilities,” confirmed Skellig. “Perhaps he has more power but is keeping it hidden for the sake of the Watchers. That would explain why they're all seemingly okay with him as the leader, and not accusing him of being a demon. Jak, anything else you can say about what he can do?”

Jak thought it through. “I don't think so, though there were times when I felt he was controlling my emotions too. Nothing huge, but sometimes there were subtle pushes in my mind that I'm not sure came from me. Like the despair I felt earlier when he stopped us from escaping.”

Skellig nodded, taking that into account. “Okay, well we can't assume we know everything. We need to set up some kind of system to spy on the Watcher camp and their leader. I, of course, am the most obvious choice.”

“Why is that?” Jak asked, curious.

“Because I am a Watcher, or I was. I doubt that many here will recognize me, and few that do will know that I was deposed. I can blend in, talk to the other Watchers, see what they know.”

Of course. Why hadn't Jak thought of that before. She just assumed having Skellig and Yewin along would make it easier to get caught. But perhaps Skellig could be a benefit after all. Yewin, on the other hand...

As if thinking on the same lines, Skellig turned to Yewin. “I'm sorry, my friend, but I'm not sure there's much you can do in this

regard. I wish I could get you out of this mountain for safety.”

“It is alright.” said Yewin. “My skills at hiding my rather distracting light source is improving, but I excel in other things. Knowledge for example. I think I might be able to help you in other ways.”

“Like what?” Skellig asked, intrigued.

“The link.” Yewin said, facing Jak.

Jak leaned back far enough she almost fell off the stone seat. “No, no way. That almost killed you the last time.”

“Hold up,” said Girwirt, turning to Yewin. “You’re saying you can link too?”

Yewin nodded. “I linked with young Jak about a year ago, and the results were...surprising.”

Jak remembered the experience clearly. She had gained the knowledge in that moment to brand Naem with Toughness and Healing. It saved his life. But the experience had nearly killed Yewin. She would not put his life in danger again, though she did admit that the benefits of the link would be useful right about now. The knowledge it had given her was enormous, even though she lost most of it shortly thereafter. It had taken nearly a year to figure out how to brand someone multiple times again.

Yewin saw the look on Jak’s face. “It’s okay, Jak. I’ll not put my life in danger again. But since these little people...”

“Hey!” protested Girwirt.

“These gnomes and dwarves have the ability to link, I think it’s worth further research. I can try to learn what I can while the rest of you do your thing.

Skellig nodded. “Very well. I’ll infiltrate the Watcher camp tomorrow. See what I can find out. Yewin will be in charge of research. And Jak...”

Jak turned to face Skellig. “I know, I’ll stay out of everyone’s way.”

Skellig nodded. “I would appreciate that. You can work with Yewin to see what more we can learn. We will need you at some point, with your abilities. But that time is not yet.”

Jak nodded, understanding. She could lay low for a while, get to know the dwarves and gnomes. Perhaps she’d learn something from Yewin’s research on the links. She would like to know more about that. She didn’t like being left out, but what more could she do?

Though that wasn’t really what disturbed her right then. Instead, her thoughts grew darker for another reason.

The buzzing in her head had redoubled. The call from whatever Relic lay beneath Dragon Lake wanted her to find it.

“W hy under the mountain would you want to know

something like that?” Girwirt said.

It was the next day, Skellig had already left to try and infiltrate the Watcher camp, and they were eating a meal of stewed mushrooms that some of the gnomes had cooked up. Girwirt seemed to love the stuff, spooning huge bites into his open mouth. It took some getting used to for Jak. But there wasn’t exactly an abundance of food in the rebel hideout so she muscled it past her gag reflex.

“I’m just saying, Doran really wanted something out of that lake. You saw him use his Telekinesis to try and get under the lava. Why else would he try to link with your people?”

“I don’t know, I just assumed he was crazy. Like all you giants seem to be.”

“She brings up an excellent point though,” said Yewin walking in on their conversation. “What was this Doran’s goals? What does he gain by linking?”

“How should I know?”

“Well, what exactly does linking do for your people? When you link with a dwarf or another gnome, what happens?”

“Simple. We share awareness.”

Yewin narrowed his eyes. “And what does that mean, share awareness.”

Girwirt sighed, muttering something about having to explain everything. But Jak leaned in closer. She was as curious as Yewin to find out how this worked. Her first experience linking had been overwhelming, but overall very positive. She wouldn’t dare harm Yewin again, but if there were another way to do it, without potentially killing someone, she would.

“You see, we gnomes specialize in fire and heat. The dwarves specialize in something far duler: the ground, or the mountain or something. Now I can heat up a rock or piece of metal, but there’s not much I can do with it on my own. When I’m linked to a dwarf, his knowledge of the material allows me to shape it with my hands.”

“You actually touch hot metal?”

“Of course I do, the heat has almost no effect on me.” Girwirt puffed out his chest. “See, we’re far more interesting than the dwarves.”

“So the armor and weapons you make,” Jak said, making connections in her head. “That’s all hand molded. You don’t have to beat it or anything, it just becomes whatever you want it to be.”

“That’s right, and the link also helps us find new materials together within the mountain.”

“So why would Doran want that for Dragon Lake?”

Girwirt shrugged. “Probably to step into it or something like that. Theoretically if he’s linked with one of the gnomes, the lava wouldn’t hurt him. But obviously he can’t keep a link active without killing us. And beats me why?”

“Has a member of your people or the dwarves been able to link with other humans?” Yewin asked, thoughtfully. “Besides Doran?”

Girwirt shook his head. “No, he tried that early on, to see if it had the same effect. Didn’t work for anyone. Your Doran said it must be a trait held by only a few. They seemed to accept that idea. Besides most looked like they didn’t want to try to be honest.”

Yewin tapped a finger to his chin. “Probably uncomfortable with the idea of killing more Fae. Or meddling with powers they don’t understand.”

Jak was inclined to think the latter. She didn’t think it likely that the Watchers cared much about the Fae. If they did, how could they stand back and watch people die at Doran’s hand? Someone would have said something eventually. More likely the queen had sent her most uncaring Watchers to work on this assignment.

“So why doesn’t he send gnomes and dwarves down into the lava to retrieve whatever he wants?” Jak asked after the thought occurred to her. “If the heat won’t kill you while you’re linked, he could just send you in without killing you.”

“Oh we don’t enter the lake,” said Girwirt. “He tried to force us a while back, but none of those he sent came back.”

“Why don’t you enter the lake?”

Girwirt looked at her like she was an idiot. “Because it’s sacred.”

“Girwirt,” she said, putting her spoon full of mushrooms down on the table. “You can’t just assume I know everything you do. How should I know your lake was special if you didn’t tell me.”

Girwirt muttered something incoherent, but seemed to take her point. But now Jak was curious again. “Why is it sacred?”

Girwirt shrugged. “Just the old legends of ancient dragons and nonsense. I don’t believe a word of it.”

“I think we’d both be curious to hear these legends in any case,”

Yewin said, crossing his arms and leaning back against the stone wall behind him.

Girwirt shrugged. "Well, supposedly when our first ancestors came to this mountain, it was unlivable. A dragon preyed on their people, or perhaps many dragons, and hot lava constantly boiled over into the land surrounding the mountain. Nothing could be built here as it would be swept aside by the molten rock, and all living things destroyed."

"One of these ancestors kept some kind of magic wand or something and he used that to calm the magma, and make the dragon sleep. They say it still sleeps beneath the rock, guarding the magic wand that keeps it there. And they also say that's why our ancestors originally inhabited this place, to guard the lake. See, nonsense. I mean, who believes in magic sticks?"

Jak's eyes had grown wider with the tale, however. A lot of these details added up in her head. If there was an artifact of some kind buried in the lava, it would make sense that two species of Fae could have evolved around it. She didn't know what all this was about dragons, she wasn't even all that sure what a dragon was, but she knew that something was indeed buried in the lava. She could still feel it calling to her, stronger than before. Could Doran feel it too? He must, or he wouldn't be so eager to reach it.

"I think I have an idea," Jak said. "But I'm not sure either of you are going to like it."

"Wouldn't make for much of a change," said Girwirt, softly. Yewin, however, watched Jak patiently, waiting to see what she would say next.

"I normally wouldn't tell you about this, but given my last blunder, I think you have the right to know, and to veto the idea if you don't like it. The Watchers out there are doing everything they can to find us. They know someone is out there who helped the failed escape. We need to give them something."

Yewin unfolded his arms. "You're right, I don't like where this is going."

"Just hear me out," said Jak. "If I give myself up, they'll have the supposed culprit. They won't keep looking for the rest of you."

"No, absolutely not," said Yewin. "It's far too dangerous."

"Hold up there, glowy giant," said Girwirt. The gnome was scratching his fiery head, looking thoughtful. "That might work. At least it would take them off our scent. There are patrols everywhere and it's only a matter of time before they find us here."

Jak nodded. "Exactly."

"But they'll kill you," Yewin protested. "You even said Doran wanted you dead the last time he spoke to you."

“It is possible,” said Jak. “But I don’t think so. There’s just one more thing I haven’t told you yet. You see, whatever Doran is trying to find in that Dragon Lake, I can feel it too. There’s definitely something down there, and it calls to me.”

Girwirt spat out a mushroom. “You mean to say those poppycock stories are true?”

Jak hesitated. “Well, I’m not sure if everything about them is true, but there’s definitely something of great power beneath the lava. I’ve felt something like it before, with a few Great Relics I’ve come across. And there are some rumors that place one of the Pillars of Eternity in this mountain. It could be the same thing.”

That got Yewin’s attention. “Indeed? Well, that would certainly explain this Doran’s obsession with the lake. But how does this mean they won’t kill you the moment you give yourself up?”

Jak sighed. “Honestly, I don’t know for sure. I’m betting on the fact that Doran will want the knowledge I have. As long as I can keep that for myself, he won’t kill me. At least, I hope not.”

“They’ll likely torture you,” Yewin pointed out.

Jak swallowed. “I know that. I’m prepared.”

Yewin rubbed a hand over his bright chin. “I don’t know. It sounds risky even in the best of scenarios. Skellig wouldn’t like it.”

“Skellig isn’t here,” Jak pointed out. “But even so, I won’t do it unless I have approval from both of you. And remember that even if I die, they will think they found the perpetrator. Skellig and the rest of you can help the rebels without overt scrutiny.”

Yewin met her eyes squarely. “You’re willing to do that?”

Girwirt raised his eyes to look at Jak too. His look was different than Jak was used to. Not frustrated or condescending like he usually appeared, but there was something of...confusion? Perhaps a glimmer of hope?

“I am,” Jak said. “And if I do live, I’ll provide a sufficient distraction for them while the rest of you work.”

Yewin sighed. “Then I suppose I will support you. Girwirt?”

“I do too.” Now Girwirt looked almost eager, the glimmer of hope swelling to something more like gratitude. But of course, the moment he caught Jak looking at him, his expression intentionally soured. “I mean, it’s about time you started making up for your mistakes.”

Jak smiled. “Oh Girwirt, don’t ever change.”

That remark seemed to confuse the gnome, who went back to his mushrooms with his brows furrowed.

Jak turned her head to look at Yewin. “I’m going today. To the Dragon Lake. Before they take me prisoner I’d like to investigate the call I feel from beneath it. If Doran can’t get his hands on it, there’s little chance I will, but it’s worth a try.” She smiled. “Besides, if I do

manage to find whatever it is, perhaps there's a chance I won't need to turn myself in. Depending on what a Pillar of Eternity actually does." None of the books she read had been very clear in that regard. They were supposed to hold some power of creation, but she had no idea what that even implied. Gabriel had called them Worldbringers. But that was equally unhelpful.

Yewin nodded. "May the ancestors illuminate your path."



LATER, Jak stood outside the rebel hideout as the stone door ground shut behind her. Everything was pitch black. Jak took a deep breath and let it out slowly. The Relic still called to her, the buzzing still increasing inside her head.

She summoned a small ball of fire in her palm, and used the light to guide her through the dark caves.

In truth, her real reason for wanting to leave the hideout was to answer the call. She didn't know how she could reach the Relic, but she knew she had to try, even if getting captured was the most likely outcome of her returning to the burning lake. That was why she had told Yewin and Girwirt. She wasn't about to let her mistakes drag the plan through the mud again. And this kind of risk was something she had to do alone.

With light to guide her, she made much better time towards the fiery lake, only pausing and extinguishing her light twice when she saw the torches of a Watcher patrol in the distance. Thankfully, none of them came too close, and she was able to continue her journey shortly thereafter.

The cavern containing the Dragon Lake was strangely empty when Jak approached. Why weren't Watchers swarming this place? Perhaps she would have some time to investigate the Relic after all.

Glancing this way and that, she made her way to the small stone outcropping where Doran had stood days earlier, where he had linked with those poor Fae.

The heat was so strong she had to brandish one arm in front of her to shield her face. But she managed to peer down at the huge mass of fiery liquid. The call was strong now, a constant thrum in her head, and seeming to come from just beneath the surface.

Almost unconsciously, she reached out with her Flamedancing brand and probed the fire beneath her. Lava moved out of the way, bulging on the right and on the left as she tried to part it down the middle, opening a path to see whatever Relic lay beneath.

But almost immediately her sense of the Relic diminished, moving

further away, deeper into the lake. When Jak tried to dig deeper with her Flamedancer abilities, it retreated even further.

Jak frowned in frustration. What was keeping it from surfacing? And why, if it called to her the way it did, was it so hard to find? Shouldn't a Relic that wanted to be found be...well, easy to find?

“That's a shame. I was hoping it would like you.”

A familiar dread rushed into Jak's stomach all at once, and she turned to face the voice.

Standing not twenty feet from her stood Doran, his arms crossed, leaning against a large stone pillar, his blonde hair glinting in the light of the lake.

Jak swallowed, every possible scenario playing out in her head. Could she fight this man? Would he let her live if she failed?

“You can feel it, can't you?” said Doran, his voice and face a complete image of calm. He wasn't afraid of her in the slightest. “I told you before, you've been a thorn in my side for far too long, but I admit I'm intrigued. Why does it call to you? And you just used Flamedancing, when your brand was Gifting. How?”

Jak searched for words, anything to keep this man talking while she thought of a plan. “So there is something down there?” she asked.

Doran nodded. “It's the reason for all of this. Everything from these pitiful Fae that stalk these mountains, to the reason this volcanic well has stayed dormant for centuries. It keeps the fire at bay. But you haven't answered my question. What is so special about you?”

Jak wasn't all that sure herself. She knew something about her made her special, or in other words, someone who could give multiple brands. To her knowledge, no one in recent history ever had that ability, though Seph's Book of Illadar had implied they once existed. Orens they were called, people of special ability. Why her? She only had a theory to that question.

“I don't know,” she said, finally. She couldn't give away too much. If he knew everything he'd have no more use for her.

“Oh I seriously doubt that,” Doran said, his eyes glinting.

A vice-like grip seized Jak on all sides. She lifted up into the air and could see a brand on Doran's hand flash with light. It was a Telekinetic brand. She could see nothing else, but knew that if Doran was anything like Kuldain, he would have more brands hidden away somehow.

“I said,” Doran's eyes flashed a bright blue. “What is so special about you?”

Not only did she feel the crushing grip pinning her arms to her sides, but Jak felt something similar surround her mind. It invaded, trying to tear the information from her, to force her to speak the words. Unbidden, they came tumbling out of her mouth. “I am an

Oren! I think it's because my mother gave birth to me after becoming a Shadow Fae."

The vices around her body and mind relaxed. "Where did you learn that name?"

"Wha...what name?" Jak asked.

"Oren," said Doran. "I haven't heard that term in a long time. Who told you about them?"

The weight on her mind grew heavy again, and she felt the indescribable desire to tell him about Seph, about the Book of Illadar, and its writer. She couldn't tell him, she needed to keep some secrets to herself!

"It was written in a book!" she blurted out. She screamed trying to stop the words from coming. "An old book written by someone named Abel."

The grip relinquished her completely this time and she fell several inches to the ground, where she lost balance and fell to her knees.

"Abel," said Doran. He turned to one side, one hand reaching behind his head, stroking his hair. "Of course it was him."

Now it was Jak's turn to have a question. "You know of him?"

Doran turned away from her completely, saying nothing for a while. "Oh, I know of him."

She no longer felt the strange compulsion on her mind, and she didn't want to go back to that anytime soon. When he said nothing else, Jak kept talking, determined to drag this conversation out as long as she could. "So what other brands do you have?" She grimaced. It wasn't the best question she'd ever had.

Doran said nothing, still lost in his own thought. So she went on. "I already defeated Kuldain, and if I can't do the same to you, someone will. The Fae are growing, and..."

She trailed off. From behind, it looked like Doran was shaking. No, not shaking, he was laughing.

"You," he said, still facing away from her. "Have no idea who I am, do you? You think Kuldain was my peer, my equal? Kuldain was a pawn, and a miserable failure."

Suddenly, he turned to face her. As he did, he seemed to grow taller, and his eyes burned a bright frost-colored blue. Darkness increased around Jak, and she scrambled backward across the uneven stone.

"My idiot brother never realized his full potential, he tried all his life to fight against me, just like my father, and it cost them both dearly. I killed Abel myself, with my own two hands, yet even now he comes back to prick me with his influence."

He continued to grow, no longer human. No longer even corporeal it seemed. All Jak saw was two ice-cold eyes staring at her from a

mass of darkness and smoke surrounding her. The dread she felt was enough to crush her to the ground. Yet through all that, she managed to speak.

“You...you’re...”

“I AM CAIN!” came the words out of the shadows. “I AM THE FIRST OREN, THE RIGHFUL KING, YOUR GREATEST ANCESTOR. AND YOU NOW SERVE ME!”

Pain shot through Jak’s entire body, pain not only of the body, but of the mind. Once again, she had underestimated her opponent. Doran wasn’t an enemy like Kuldain. He was something far more. Something beyond anything she possessed.

The pain pressed in around her, stifling her. She couldn’t breathe. Please, no more. Let her black out, oh Relics, let her black out. Anything to make it stop!

But she didn’t black out. She remained conscious as the pain racked her body and failure crushed her mind. Her screams echoed in the caverns.

# S

he was still alive. That much Jak knew. But Relics, she wished she wasn't.

She lay crumpled on a hard, cold floor. Every muscle in her body screamed as she moved for the first time. Large metal and leather restraints surrounded her arms, but she groaned and pushed as hard as she could against the stone to raise herself up and look around. A pale light illuminated the area around her. A cool light, not like the warm light of fire that she had grown used to under the mountain.

Her eyes followed the light until she found its source. High above her head she could see what looked like a hole in the ceiling. What a strange thing. It was small, or at least, it looked small from where she lay. It was so far away that it might just be enormous. The light glinted on structures that reached almost as high as the hole itself.

That was when Jak got her first good look at the underground Fae city. It was absolutely enormous, stretching thousands of feet in the air. Each building was gilded with gold, silver, and other metals ranging in colors Jak had never seen in a building. It glimmered and cast its light all over the cavern. She had thought the cavern around Dragon Lake was big, it was nothing compared to this space. Jak even felt cool air touch her skin, the first time in days now.

“She’s awake,” a voice said from behind her. “Bring her.” It wasn’t Doran, or rather Cain’s voice. She turned to see a relatively young Watcher approaching her. He was maybe five or six years older than her, and she saw he bore a brand of Strength on his left hand.

That reminded her, she had her own brand of Strength, so why did it feel so hard to even move right now? The Watcher drew closer. If she could break her bonds, perhaps she’d have a chance to escape?

She strained, trying to break the cords and chains that held her hands together. But she might as well have tried to move a mountain. Nothing. Her strength did nothing to help. Well, if that didn’t work, perhaps a bit of fire. She summoned her will to activate the Flamedancer brand and...

Nothing.

Jak looked down at her hands. Why weren't her brands working? The Watcher finally reached her, saying nothing as he picked her up by the arm effortlessly. She winced as the pain of his grip shot through her arm. "Where are you taking me?" she asked.

The Watcher glanced at her, but said nothing. He didn't need to. The Watcher pulled her into a large tent, where another Watcher sat in a large chair that must have been built by the dwarves and gnomes, given its ornate construction and gilded corners. The man was older than most of the Watchers Jak was used to seeing. His grizzled face was framed by a white mane of hair, and a long scar ran from his left ear down to the white stubble on his chin, which he stroked as he watched Jak.

"You've created quite a stir, it seems." He said as the other Watcher let go of Jak. She lay on the floor, not saying anything as she tried to assess the situation. "Sergeant, let's not leave our guest in such conditions, bring her something to eat and drink."

The young Watcher saluted and retreated to do as ordered. Jak looked back at the older Watcher. He must be some other leader here, in addition to Cain.

"I'm afraid I can't undo your bonds, but we are not uncivilized here. My name is Captain Barrows." He reached his left hand to his chest in a standard greeting, revealing his brand of Grace. "Please, tell me your name?"

"I'm Jak," she said.

"There, that wasn't so hard," said the older man. "I'm not sure what our dear leader did to you, but you were out for quite a while. I was beginning to wonder if you would ever wake."

A million questions began to form in Jak's mind. She started with, "How am I still alive?"

The man set his jaw. "Our orders are to keep you here, restrained for now. The General intends to interrogate you personally now that you're awake. I thought I'd try talking to you first."

"Why?"

"You intrigue me, girl. How did you maintain your sanity when you received your extra brands? And who gave them to you?"

"Why can't I use them?" Jak asked, ignoring his questions.

The man pursed his lips when she didn't answer properly. But he soon smiled again. "I'm afraid we had to give you a Void band. A simple precaution, I hope you understand."

Jak looked down at her arms and turned them over to see one of the metal braces on her hand did indeed bear a Void brand, the one brand that could negate other forms of magic.

The sergeant returned with some water in hand and a small loaf of bread in the other. He offered them to Jak, who took first the goblet

of water in her tied hands and drank as much as she could. She shuddered, feeling the cool liquid go down her throat. The captain must have been right about her being out for a long time. She was incredibly thirsty.

The captain watched her as she switched from the water to the bread.

“So tell me, girl, how did you do it? And why is the General so interested in you?”

She looked back up at the Captain and swallowed what bread was still in her mouth. “I branded myself, and I’m still not certain how or why I can do it. But you have to know, your General is not what he seems.”

Captain Barrow frowned. “I admit his methods have been a little unorthodox, but he gets results. The queen assigned him here personally.”

“No, I mean, he’s not even human. He’s like a demon or...or something worse. I don’t know how to describe it. But you’re all in danger the longer you stay near him.”

The Captain’s eyebrows rose in amusement. “Is that so? Well, I’ll be sure to tell the rest of the men and women to pack up and we’ll all leave straight away.”

For a moment, Jak felt a glimmer of hope before immediately realizing that the man couldn’t be serious. He was mocking her!

“You’ll find out eventually,” she said, letting her bound hands rest on the ground. “Don’t trust him.”

“Girl, I don’t trust anyone. That’s how I lived so long, and also why I’m sure you will understand that I can’t trust you either. Regardless...” he raised himself out of his chair with a slight groan. “I’ve held you long enough. It’s time to take you to see him.”

Panic gripped Jak’s heart. “Please, you can’t take me to him.”

“It’s not up to me, girl. Sergeant, please take this girl to the General’s personal quarters.”

Jak struggled but it did no good. She had no use of her brands, and the sergeant possessed Strength. She could do nothing against him.

He dragged her away from the captain and towards one of the buildings nearby. It was taller than the ones around it, and Jak assumed it had once belonged to a dwarf or gnome of some significance. The sergeant knocked.

Jak waited, feeling herself cringe a bit as she heard footsteps on the other side. Those footsteps belonged to something that was not a man. They belonged to a force of nature. And yet none of the Watchers knew this about their leader, or knew just how much danger they were in.

The door swung open and Doran stood there. No, Jak thought

immediately. She wouldn't think of him as Doran again. By his own admittance, this was Cain. How he was still alive after thousands of years, she did not know. But he was dangerous. If she could have done so, she would have run away as fast as she could.

"Ah, Sergeant," Cain said, greeting the Watcher. His voice was friendly and not at all what Jak expected. "Thank you so much for bringing her. I can take it from here."

The invisible force of telekinesis surrounded her body as Cain mentally moved her out of the sergeant's grip and atop a long table that sat in the middle of the room. The sergeant saluted, turned on one heel and marched back the way he had come. The monstrous creature with the face of Doran closed the door behind him, and turned to face her lying on the table.

She quivered where she lay, despite the telekinetic hold that pinned her arms to her sides. Every fiber of her body wanted to bolt, to run. But she was helpless, completely at the mercy of...whatever this person really was.

"I may have started our relationship a little poorly," he said, striding closer to look down at her. He still kept that cheery tone even with the other Watcher gone. "But it seemed necessary to give you a taste of who you're dealing with."

Jak said nothing, crippled by more fear than she had ever experienced in her life. Was there any way to fight a being like this? He seemed normal now, but Jak knew beneath the surface lay a monster like nothing she or anyone had ever encountered.

"I suppose you're wondering why you're still alive?" Cain said, turning and summoning a chair to sit in with his magic. "After all, you've done nothing but cause trouble since I first encountered you over a year ago." Jak looked at him. "Yes, I'll admit, that was me who woke you up that morning. It ended up being a very eventful day for you, didn't it?"

"What are you going to do to me?" Jak croaked. "Are you...you're not..." she glanced down at her immobile body.

Cain's eyes darkened just enough for Jak to notice. "Oh, don't worry about that, child. I long ago lost interest in such pleasures. And I'll make sure my men see it the same way. No, instead I crave knowledge. There is more I would learn about you before you die. If you can feel the power waiting beneath that lake of lava, then there is something about you that I must uncover." His voice grew rougher. "It is the only thing that kept me from killing you."

Suddenly, his voice adopted that cheerful tone again. "But I am not without mercy. Perhaps I was too hasty to want to destroy you. A girl like you, with your abilities, you could become one of my choice lieutenants, second in power only to myself. All I need is a little

cooperation from you.”

Jak felt herself shivering uncontrollably. Her instinctive reaction was to defy such a creature, but she had no idea what he would do to her if she did. She didn’t care about her own life. She had been prepared to sacrifice that when she came to Dragon Lake the last time. No, she was worried about the others. Skellig, Yewin, the mountain and fire Fae, not to mention the rest of the Fae in the world, and the good people that supported them. This Cain clearly had no love of the Fae. What would he do if Jak decided to help him? But then again, what could she possibly do to stop him either way, alive or dead?

Cain marked her hesitation. “It’s all a bit overwhelming, I know. I’ll give you some time to think it over, but in the meantime...” He waved a hand and Jak’s shackles burst apart, freeing her hands, though the metal bands remained tightened around her wrists, and she still couldn’t move under Cain’s telekinetic grip. “You will not need those. You will need your hands. But don’t think that you can just run away.”

Jak winced as she felt one of the metal shackles around her wrist burn. She looked down to see a new brand forming there, one Jak had never seen anywhere. Could this be a completely new, undiscovered brand? What did it do?

Her answer came as Cain spoke again. “Face me.” Unbidden, Jak’s head turned so swiftly that she thought her neck might strain. It hadn’t been Cain’s telekinesis that did it. Some other force compelled her to obey. She swallowed, now with an idea of what the new brand did.

Cain took two steps forward, towering over where she lay on the table. One hand reached down and stroked her cheek. “You’re lucky this brand overwhelms the mind if applied directly to a person. The shackle will have to do for now. You will not remove it without my say so. You will not allow someone else to remove it. You will not attempt to leave this place. You will obey my every command and those of my subordinates, as long as their commands do not conflict with my own or threaten your life in some way.”

With each command, Jak could feel something come over her, a feeling she couldn’t explain. It was almost like feeling a weight, like a heavy blanket being draped over her entire body. It grew stronger with every word Cain uttered.

“Say you understand,” Cain said in a darker tone.

“I understand!” Jak blurted out before she could stop herself. Pain racked her thoughts. How would she get out of this one?

“Very good.” Cain smiled at her, and she felt sick. “The other shackle carries the Void brand. You will not try to remove it unless I give you the word to do so.”

Jak felt that command settle into her as well. Why did it feel like both metal bands on her wrists seemed tighter than before? The chains connecting them were gone, but in a way, she was more a captive now than she had ever been.

Cain let her go then, allowing her to exit his command building on her own two feet. He had no need to fear her now. She couldn't run away, she couldn't use any of her powers. There was literally nothing she could do of her own accord.

“Captain Barrows,” he said, coming out of the chamber behind her. A moment later the captain’s head appeared from inside his tent not far off.

“Yes, general.”

“I have ensured that this one will not leave, using a special Relic granted to me by the queen herself.” Cain indicated the shackle on Jak’s wrist. If the situation hadn’t been so serious, she might have laughed. If only these people knew that the so-called “Relic” Cain spoke of was actually something he had made in the last few minutes, not some special artifact of the past.

“Very good, sir,” said the captain.

“She is to assist with the mining until I summon her again,” Cain continued. “And she is not to be harmed in any way. Any who does so will answer to me directly. Is that clear?”

“Absolutely, sir!” Captain Barrows saluted and then waved Jak over. Cain did nothing to protest, so Jak obeyed, feeling the bond constrain her. There was literally nothing she could do to resist.

She held onto one small hope though. It was the tiniest glimmer of light in an otherwise overwhelming darkness. Cain hadn’t asked her about any companions. He clearly assumed she was here alone. Skellig was still out there somewhere, among the Watchers, and Yewin was also free with the rest of the dwarf and gnome rebels. None of them could challenge Cain directly, and it would be too dangerous to help Jak escape. But she hoped they could at least get themselves out and warn everyone else.

“ J

ak,” came a soft whisper. Jak looked up from pushing a heavy cart in the fire-lit tunnels. She had been assigned to help the dwarves carry the ore they extracted from the deep mines to the forges above. It was heavy work, and she’d been at it for days, but Jak forgot all about her aching muscles as she recognized the person in front of her.

“Skellig, what are you doing?” she said in a harsh whisper. “You’ll get yourself caught talking to me.”

“None of the others are close, and I took over your guard duty. If we hurry, you can escape once we reach the upper tunnels.”

Jak began pushing her cart again and Skellig fell into a slow pace behind her. “I’m sorry, I can’t leave,” Jak said.

“Don’t be an idiot, girl. You know nothing good can come of you staying here.”

“No, I mean literally I can’t leave. Their leader branded me with some kind of new brand that makes me do what he says.” She raised her arm to show off the branded shackle.

“Well, that’s easy enough, give it here and I can take it off.”

“NO!” Jak’s shout echoed through the tunnel and she snatched her hand back.

“Quiet, girl, do you want to get us killed!”

“I’m sorry,” Jak clutched her hand. “I was ordered not to let anyone else touch it, and I have no choice but to obey.”

Skellig thought that through. “I could force it off if needed.”

“You probably could, but I don’t know what that would do to me. I don’t think I could disobey an order without injuring myself in some way. Besides, the noise I would make might make others come running and then we’d both be caught. The only advantage you have is that their leader does not know about you.”

“I’ll find him then, force him to get you out.”

“No,” Jak said again, sharply. “He’s powerful beyond anything I’ve ever seen. I didn’t stand a chance against him with all my brands combined. You won’t either.”

Skellig frowned, “I suppose.”

“Please, Skellig,” Jak implored. “Listen to me on this one thing. Do not go after him. You will not survive and then he will know that I have help in the mountain. He’ll know there are rebels hidden somewhere. Then all he would need to do is ask me and I would tell him. I can’t hold anything back.”

“Alright, I won’t make any moves against him or to free you,” Skellig said.

Jak let out a breath. “Thank you.” Then spying the spear Skellig carried, she added, “Hey, that’s my spear.”

Skellig smiled. “I’m holding onto it until you can take it again. Because you will, Jak. We’ll get through this. What’s your plan of survival? If this Cain hasn’t extracted everything you know, he will eventually.”

“I know.” The thought had occurred to Jak. “But I know that anyone who helps me will only suffer the same fate. I’ll have to get out of this one on my own. If you want to help me, the best thing you can do is get out of the mountain and go warn Seph, Gabriel and the others over at Riverbrook. They’ll need all the information they can get about what’s happening here, and about their leader, Cain.”

As they walked, Jak told Skellig everything she had learned about the Watchers’ mysterious leader. Skellig listened intently, showing little emotion, though she did look at her sharply when Jak described how he had treated her whilst strapped to the table.

“I’m glad he didn’t hurt you,” she said finally, turning away and continuing to walk alongside Jak.

“I am too, but it won’t be long before he does,” she said. “He’s keeping me here until I either break and join him, or he realizes that there’s no further use for me.”

“So what do you plan to do?”

Jak let her head hang. “I don’t know yet. I’m working on it, but I will do what I can to free some of the Fae here. Whatever chance I get, I’ll send them towards the hideout. The Watchers here keep everyone under lock and key, but they probably don’t notice when someone goes missing. And they have no idea that there’s secretly a resistance building.”

“That’s fortunate for us,” said Skellig. “As long as their leader doesn’t probe you for information. We can’t assume that he won’t.”

“Yes, I know,” said Jak. “Like I said, I’m working on it.”

They drifted into silence as they passed a group of three young Watchers. A few glanced at Jak, but everyone had been informed that she would be working here, so they paid her no mind. They didn’t even look at Skellig, who was just another guard in their eyes.

Eventually they arrived at a larger room near the city where

dozens of dwarves and gnomes worked. Jak was familiar with the place by now. This was where the gnomes and dwarves made the elaborate armor and weapons the Watchers took out of the mountain. It was the main reason the Watchers were here, though it was more likely a front that gave Cain an excuse to search for the Relic under Dragon Lake.

The gnomes and dwarves stood in pairs, and Jak observed, fascinated, as they linked with each other. That strange outline of light enveloped each pair. The metal they touched would then grow red hot. With the link active it did nothing to burn the gnomes or even the dwarves that held it in their hands. There were pairs melting down the metals entirely then removing the impurities that rose to the top, and there were others that took that pure, refined metal and began shaping it into a weapon or piece of armor.

There were guards everywhere in this chamber. Almost one for every pair of the Fae. Several also took the smith work once it had been quenched and cooled. Apparently they didn't trust the dwarves and gnomes to carry the items once they had been made. Eventually those pieces of metalwork would be carried out of the mountain by the Watchers and shipped to Skyecliff. And who knew what the queen was doing with the pieces there?

Jak moved her cart to the end of a large stone table where several dwarves and gnomes were waiting to receive it. They would then begin the process of purifying the metal. Jak couldn't help but notice their faces. None of them bore any expression. All were resigned to their duties. Did they even know that several of their brothers and sisters had escaped and were even now trying to figure out how to help them? She couldn't see anything, not the faintest glimmer of hope for their situation.

And what was worse, Jak kind of understood. She didn't see any way to get out of her situation either. Between the Void brand, and whatever new brand Cain had used to control her actions, she wasn't left with any kind of options.

She raised her wrists to observe the brands again. The mind control brand was far more complex than anything she had ever seen. To her knowledge, the Telekinesis brand was the most complex that anyone else knew how to perform. Which would explain why she hadn't had any luck trying to use the brand herself.

The Void brand was just as she had seen before on the Royal Priest of Skyecliff, and on the cage he had tried to imprison her in. What would happen if that Void brand were applied to her skin directly? Would she gain the ability to Void other people's abilities, or would it cancel out all of her other brands? That wasn't really something she wanted to find out. While she had thought about giving herself other

brands, she probably wouldn't risk that one.

That was, of course, if she ever got out of her current predicament. Staring at the brands now, she had no idea how she was going to get past them. Her only option, really, was to have someone force them off of her. But she couldn't ask someone to do that, as that would count as trying to take them off, which was something Cain ordered her not to do. Besides, she wasn't sure forcing a release like that would be good for her. It might cause more problems than it was worth.

Once all the metal was unloaded off of her cart, she began the long arduous march back towards the mines. She had done this twice already today, and over and over again in the days before. Her legs ached but there wasn't much she could do about that. Skellig remained with her for the remainder of her shift, but didn't say much to Jak as they went along. There wasn't much more to say, and talking at all could make others suspicious of Skellig. So they walked in silence for the majority of their time together.

"I'll check up on you when I can," Skellig offered once her shift was nearly over. "Whatever you do, don't lose hope."

Jak smiled, but said nothing more as Skellig's replacement arrived. Then she began the process of going back and forth between the mine and the forges, this time accompanied by someone else.

She recognized this Watcher. He had been the sergeant that she'd met when she first woke up in the city several days earlier, the one their Captain Barrows had ordered to get food for her. Her stomach growled, and she wiped the soot and sweat off her forehead. She could use some of that food and water right now.

"Hello again!" She said to the young Watcher. He looked started at her cheery tone, which she had to force just a little. When he didn't say anything in return, Jak kept talking. "Thank you for bringing me the water and bread before. That was exactly what I needed at the time. How long have you been here?"

He still said nothing. "Come on, you can't enjoy not talking to anyone any more than I do."

"We're not supposed to talk to the slaves," he said finally.

*The slaves.* Those words grated at Jak's soul, and not just because he counted her among them. But she redirected her anger at Cain. This soldier was barely older than Jak. He was just following orders. Right?

"Well, can't you at least tell me your name? You're one of the only people here that I have any familiarity with. And besides, there's no one else around right now."

The Watcher grumbled something under his breath.

"Sorry, what was that?" Jak asked, putting one hand to an ear to

listen better.

“My name is Sergeant Nolm,” he said in a clearer voice.

Sergeant Nolm. The name reminded her of another young sergeant she had known. Though this man didn’t seem nearly as cocky. She experienced a moment of anguish as she thought back on Naem’s betrayal. Hopefully this Watcher wouldn’t gain her trust then betray her like he had. But of course, that was silly. This situation was totally different.

Shaking off her thoughts, she smiled. “Pleased to meet you, Sergeant Nolm. I’m Jak. But you knew that already. How long have you been with the Watchers? And what brought you here?”

The Watcher shifted his shoulders uncomfortably as they walked. “Why are you talking to me? I can’t...help you or anything, if that’s what you want.”

“I don’t want you to do anything like that,” Jak said, though she dropped her voice to a more sober tone. “It’s just nice to have someone to talk to, you know?”

“Yeah, I guess I can understand that.” He was looking a bit more relaxed now.

“So what can you tell me?”

“Well.” He glanced around as if searching for other Watchers. “I guess there’s no harm in telling you some things. I’ve been a Watcher for two years. I’m from Skyecliff. My aunt is the General there, and she set me up here. Said it was a very important, top-secret assignment.” He puffed out his chest just a bit.

Jak swallowed. She had fought this boy’s aunt, General Wilva, and won. She had no idea what she was doing now that the city had been nearly overrun with demons. She hoped Wilva wasn’t dead.

“And has it been everything you’ve expected here?” she asked, probing in a slightly different direction.

She watched carefully to observe his reaction. To his credit, he frowned slightly. “It’s my assignment. I don’t choose them.”

“That’s them talking,” Jak said. “What do you think?”

Nolm looked troubled. “I’m not sure I understand what you’re asking?”

Jak sighed. “It’s nothing. It’s just, I’ve seen too many bad things happen because soldiers blindly followed their leaders.”

“They have to maintain order,” said Nolm. His face was definitely troubled now, almost angry. “If everyone just did what they think, nothing good would come of it.”

“I understand that. A good leader can steer a nation for the better. But what if he or she is not a good leader? Is it better to move with the flow, or go against it. In both cases you could argue you’re doing it for the greater good.” Jak was talking to herself more now, though

Nolm didn't recognize it.

"I suppose that is true," he said. "But who's to say that you're right, and that General Doran or Captain Barrows aren't good leaders?"

"Hm? I was just speaking generally. I don't know enough about your Captain Barrows to know if he's a good man or not."

"I think he is," Nolm said, simply.

"Well, that's one credit to his favor." Jak smiled at Nolm.

"You didn't mention General Doran," Nolm said, meeting her gaze but not returning her smile.

"I'm sorry?"

"You said you don't know if Captain Barrows is a good man, but you didn't mention the General. That implies that you know more about him."

"You're very astute, Nolm," Jak went back to pushing her cart. "No, he is not a good man."

She left it at that, knowing that it wouldn't do any good to argue. Nolm didn't say anything either for a while. Finally, he spoke again. "But that's just your opinion though. And if he says you're also trouble, it's his word against yours. How can you blame anyone for following a superior in a situation like that?"

"How indeed?" Jak said. Her eyelids were beginning to itch. She was growing tired. "In any event, I'm not trying to pull you to my side, Nolm. Just arguing won't bring anyone to my side, at least that's been the case so far."

"I don't think this is arguing," said Nolm, still walking beside her. They were approaching the forges now, Jak could taste the soot on the air. "It's more like discussing philosophy."

Jak chuckled. "I suppose it is. And I've enjoyed talking to you, Nolm. All of the others seem to think I'm too dangerous, like I'd somehow trick them into joining my side if they dared open their mouths." Apart from Skellig, of course. But she didn't need to mention her.

"The General told us not to," said Nolm. "He says you're trouble."

"And what do you think?" Jak asked, glancing at him once again. "Isn't it also dangerous to talk to me when your General told you not to?"

"Maybe, if he found out," Nolm said. "But you don't seem very dangerous to me."

"See?" Jak felt cheery once again. "There you go making up your own mind, independent of those around you."

"I'm not going to let you out or anything."

"Of course not, and I would never ask that of you." Jak didn't mention that he probably couldn't help even if he tried. But she was

glad that someone was open minded enough to talk to her. That alone helped.

They stayed silent now as they approached the first line of guards surrounding the forges. Jak could feel the temperature increase as she entered the chamber, the heat caused by the pools of liquid metal and the objects being actively molded by gnomes and dwarves.

Jak did a quick glance around the room to see if she could see Noralim. She hadn't seen the dwarf since he was taken in the failed escape. Though to be fair it was nearly impossible to make out the faces of each Fae. The light was dim, and their faces were always covered with soot and dust.

She pushed her cart up alongside the stone table where the gnomes began extracting the metal. Nolm stood behind her, watchful as any good soldier would be. She took just a moment to breathe and survey the room. She winced as she heard the crack of a whip as a Watcher "encouraged" one of the Fae to work harder. She had to help these people, and she would find a way if it was the last thing she did.

Grabbing another empty cart, she turned it around and began the long process of descending back into the darkness.

# I

t was another arduous day of carrying raw ore back and forth, back and forth. For days, General Doran, or Cain as she now thought of him, kept her here doing hard labor. What was he getting at? Was he trying to break her spirit? If so, she was worried it might be working.

She found herself growing more and more tired with each day. This wasn't like when she first joined the Watchers and Naem had given her strenuous exercises to do throughout the day. Back then she'd had plenty of food and water, not to mention rest. Here, she had far less of those things, and it was beginning to wear on her. Each day she seemed to start with less energy than the day before.

Her conversations with Nolm and Skellig were the only things that kept her sane, though Skellig came far less frequently than before. And she'd managed to get one or two of the others to open up, usually the younger Watchers. They seemed more intrigued by her than fearful. A girl that had multiple brands that upset the general? What was more interesting than that?

During the nights she stayed with the rest of the workers in cold, bare caverns. Most of them didn't want to talk to her, primarily from the fact that she had been behind their failed escape, and few wanted to associate with her for fear of the Watchers taking notice. And she never could find Noralim among them.

That was until several days later when she stepped into the forges with a fresh pile of raw metal. As soon as she did, she recognized the first dwarf to begin processing what she brought.

"Noralim!" She said in an excited whisper. She didn't want to alert any of the guards standing all around them.

The dwarf beamed at her. "I'm so glad you're not dead, young one. They only just let the rest of us join the others again, so I never knew if you were alive or not."

"I'm alive, but where have you been?"

"Locked away with many of the other failed escapees. They asked us questions, but didn't learn anything from me. Especially when they

thought you were the real source of the problem. But they took many of us to link with their leader. They never came back."

"I'm sorry," Jak said, knowing what it meant when a Fae was taken to link with Cain. "I have so much to tell you, but not here. I'll see you tonight in the caverns." She was referring to the open, unfurnished caverns where the captive dwarves and gnomes slept.

Noralim nodded and got back to his work, carefully avoiding the gaze of a Watcher who drifted nearby to check on them.

Crack! The sound of a whip echoed through the chamber, and Jak winced again as she heard a gnome cry out. Crack! The whip sounded again. And a third time, and a fourth. Jak turned to face the sound, marking one of the older Watchers standing over a small, cringing form on the ground.

"Get up," said the Watcher. "You know what will happen to you if you fall behind. They'll take you to the lake and you'll never come back. Get back to work!" the whip cracked once again.

This wasn't good. The gnome couldn't move from the pain alone. The man had to see that. If he gave the gnome a chance maybe he'd get up on his own. Just a little patience would...crack! The gnome squealed as the whip met its mark again.

"Hey!" Jak yelled, forgetting herself completely. "Stop!"

All heads turned in her direction. The older Watcher looked shocked. "Stop?" he said, as if not hearing her right.

"Just..." Jak pulled herself up short. Watchers surrounded her, with swords half-drawn, or their brands activated. She wouldn't win here in a fight. "Just let him be. You're not even giving him a chance to get up."

"Oh, you've got some nerve, girl. You've got a Void brand holding you back, you can't do anything to hurt me." He waved his brand hand in front of her. It was Thunder, a rarer brand, but useful, allowing the user to call down lightning from out of nowhere, though it worked better during a storm. Most people didn't bother with it when Flamedancing was a far more powerful and predictable brand. But it did have its unique qualities. For instance, lightning could pass through metal, where fire could not.

Everyone around them was tense, human, dwarf, and gnome. The injured gnome began picking himself up, staggering, then running back to his comrades as swiftly as he could. He probably hoped to blend in so the Watcher didn't notice where he went.

"Come back here!" said the Watcher. The whip cracked again, but this time his brand activated and a jolt of lightning sped down the length of the whip as it arched through the air. The gnome didn't scream this time as the whip met its mark. He merely froze in mid stride and fell forward, temporarily paralyzed by the Thunder-infused

strike.

Without thinking, Jak ran forward as fast as she could and barreled into the older Watcher. He staggered, not expecting her to act so fast. The rest of the Watchers darted forward to restrain her, but by then the damage had been done. The Watcher took two steps backward to hold his balance, but on the second step his legs hit the edge of one of the forges. Realizing what was happening, the closest Watcher darted forward to try and catch the man before he completed his fall.

But it was too late. Jak watched, held by three separate Watchers, as the older man fell backwards into the forge. The scream that split the air pierced into her soul. Molten metal enveloped the man and his clothes instantly lit on fire.

Jak closed her eyes, turning away from the horrifying sight. It didn't take long before the screams ceased, and they were left with an eerie silence. Nobody made a sound, not the dwarves, nor the gnomes, nor the Watchers.

Finally, "Kill her!" came from one of the Watchers. And suddenly the entire chamber erupted in the sound of voices talking over each other. The Watchers that held Jak remained motionless, not knowing what to do. They looked this way and that as Watchers screamed for her death.

One darted forward, wrenching her out of the arms of the guards. "You'll pay for that. That was my uncle, you witch!"

Was this it? Was this how she was going to die? After everything that had happened, she would burn in a vat of boiling metal as punishment for saving a gnome, who, she realized, would just return to his horrifying life of labor.

A ball of fire exploded at the ground near them. The Watcher that pulled on her stopped in his tracks and Jak followed his gaze. Another Watcher stood a half-dozen paces off, and fire shot out of his hand. A Flamedancer. "We can't kill her, you know our orders."

"But my uncle!" said the Watcher. His face was contorted with fury and sorrow. Jak said nothing, feeling her fate was now completely out of her hands. Stupid, Jak. Why did she have to go killing a Watcher? How is that going to help anybody?

"We'll take her to the General and let him decide. You can plead your situation to him."

The man looked like he was about to throw Jak into the forge anyway. But on an additional warning glance from the other Watcher, he relaxed his grip. The Flamedancer signaled and two sets of arms took hold of Jak from either side.

"Take her away."

On their way out, Jak caught the barest glimpse of the young gnome she had saved. He kept himself partially hidden behind two

dwarves, but his eyes met hers. Those eyes glistened, and there was gratitude in his gaze.

That was why she'd done what she did. To see someone thank her like that, even without words. She would always speak up against oppression, no matter the cost.

Even if the cost was more than she bargained for.



“YOU JUST WILL NOT QUIT, will you.”

She was in Cain's quarters for the second time, though this time she stood, holding her head up high. She had made her bed now, and it was time to face the consequences. She had only one fear, that Cain would use this opportunity to force more information from her. While killing the old Watcher didn't have anything to do with Skellig or the others, any encounter with Cain risked his learning more than she wanted him to know.

“I can't just let these things go, you know,” he was sitting casually in a corner chair, his arms draped along arm rests, looking for all the world like he didn't care at all that one of his men had been murdered. “They expect me to do something, to enact some false sense of justice. But this venture would be far more...tedious without their involvement, so I must keep them happy. Respect, my young Jak, respect is the only true power in the world, and I must keep their respect. Tell me, what do you propose I do?”

“If you're going to kill me, then just get it over with,” said Jak. Back in the forges she had nearly faced death and found that it didn't scare her as much as she thought it might. Besides, with her gone, Cain would have no way of learning about Skellig, Yewin, and the rebels, giving them a fighting chance. At least as good of a chance as it was possible to have against someone like Cain.

“Well, I can't do that, unfortunately. But I have an idea, one that should placate those mongrels who follow me and teach you a valuable lesson.”

Jak narrowed her eyes at him. What was he planning?

“Yes, I think that will do it,” he said, more to himself than to Jak. “I was planning to wait until I had tried a few more methods myself, but now is as good of a time as ever. Come.”

He wrapped Jak up in a vice of telekinetic energy. The door flung open of its own accord and Jak floated through the air, as if on strings, through the opening while Cain followed. He spun her to face the small crowd of Watchers, who waited to know what kind of sentence their general would pass.

Cain held one hand in the air, his Telekinetic brand clearly visible and glowing as he held Jak aloft with its powers. If only the others knew what other abilities Cain had at his disposal.

“I’m afraid, I cannot kill the girl like you requested. I still have further uses for her.”

Murmurs ran through the crowd. Jak spotted the young Watcher whose uncle had been the man she killed. His fists were clenched and veins were bulging near his temples. Others looked similarly enraged.

“But, don’t worry, the death of your comrade will be properly avenged. Perhaps, in the end, we will make her wish for a punishment as easy as death.”

If Jak had been capable, she would have faced Cain to stare at him. What was he planning? Whatever it was didn’t sound good. She could only hope that he was over exaggerating for the benefit of the angry Watchers. Indeed, they seemed eager to see what Cain had in store.

Cain wheeled her about, keeping her suspended high above all of their heads, like some kind of oddity on display. Then he bore her aloft as he began walking to the edge of the city, down into the caverns. Curiously, none of this bothered Jak too much. She’d been stared at, despised, spat at, and worse during her time at Skyecliff. For once, she didn’t care what anyone thought. Though as the crowd fell in to surround and follow their general, Jak caught the face of several people she recognized. General Barrows stood with one hand stroking his white beard, and next to him stood Nolm. Jak wasn’t sure she understood the expression she saw on his face. Confusion? Anger? Whatever it was, he did not look happy about it.

Jak caught the gazes of several others she recognized, men and a few women she had talked to on her long journeys to and from the forges. Some were angry, others bore expressions similar to Nolm’s, confused or undergoing some kind of inward searching.

The temperature rose around Jak, as did the humidity. Beads of sweat began forming on her forehead, running into her eyes and stinging as she couldn’t wipe them away. Add to that a familiar humming that was beginning to increase in volume in her head. That could only mean one thing.

They marched out of the large tunnel and into a dimly lit cavern where Dragon Lake lay motionless in the center. Jak didn’t like this. What were they going to do here? Was Cain going to make her watch as he killed more Fae with his link? It would be cruel, yes, but the punishment didn’t seem to fit the crime, and neither would it satisfy the Watchers that wanted blood. Unless...

Oh no, he couldn’t possibly mean...

“Let’s see if she has any more luck with the link than I have,” said

Cain. A few grunts of approval greeted his proclamation. "You." He pointed at the nephew of the Watcher she'd killed. "I have men holding the little Fae demon this one tried to save. In the forges, go get him. Bring a dwarf as well, I don't care which."

The man saluted and ran off as fast as he could.

"No," Jak said, trying her best to lock eyes with Cain. It was difficult as her arms were pinned to her sides and she had no way of turning her body. "Please, don't take it out on them. I'll do anything."

Cain brought her down until she was level with him. Speaking in a low tone so that only she could hear, he said. "Little one. This is the only thing I could possibly want you to do. I was merely waiting to find the right time, and to give you perspective on my other...offer. Though I suppose if you were to accept, I could make this all go away."

For a moment, just a moment, she considered it. After all, she had experienced Cain's power firsthand. She knew better than anyone here what he was capable of. What hope did she have of fighting that. But if she were to join him, she could have that power for herself. Perhaps even exceed the power of Cain in time, take it for herself, kill him when the time was right. Could that end justify the means?

Jak set her jaw. Of course it couldn't. She would not sell her soul for that chance. Even if she did defeat Cain in the future, what would be the cost? Hundreds of lives? Thousands? Even if it meant a few painful sacrifices now, she would not become the evil she fought to defeat. No, there was only one response to his proposal.

She spit in Cain's face, knowing full well the danger she played with. Cain's eyes flashed a bright blue, though only Jak was in a position to see it. "Very well," he said, wiping the spittle from his cheek. "Then we do this the hard way."

He spun her around so she was facing Dragon Lake. Hot air licked at her face as Cain brought her down and forced her to kneel.

She felt a slight tug on one wrist and looked down. Shocked, she realized that one of her shackles was gone, loosed by Cain himself. It was the one with the Void brand. Instantly she could feel that awareness of the fire in front of her.

"You will not use your abilities until I give the word." Cain whispered in her ear from behind.

Immediately she felt that sensation, like a heavy blanket draping over her, as his command sunk in. She still felt the potential of her abilities just out of reach, but she could no sooner touch them now than she could have with the Void brand on her wrist.

It wasn't long before the Watcher returned with two Fae in tow, one dwarf and the gnome Jak had saved earlier. Her eyes began to sting as she saw the young gnome, the bruises and open sores inflicted

by the whip more visible than ever.

“Ah, here they are!” Cain said with an air of theatricality for the benefit of his men. “Let us see if this helps to force our little troublemaker see the futility of her actions. After all, you can get anyone to change with the proper motivation.”

“Please.” Jak said one last time, though she knew it wouldn’t do any good now. “Please, all of you, you can’t be okay with this. They’re innocent.”

“They’re mindless, dumb animals good for one thing, making us stronger. Thanks to them, our beloved queen will have the strongest army in the world. She will be able to vanquish all demons within our borders, and strengthen those borders against foreign invaders.”

Jak closed her eyes. Why did she even bother to argue? Of course Cain had answers to those kind of questions. How else would he manage to keep the other Watchers in line, and accepting of the terrible way they treated the Fae. By marginalizing them and finding a way to make it look like it was for the greater good, appealing to their sense of nationality and identity. It was horrifying. It was brilliant.

Jak turned to try and see the gnome who knelt behind her on her right side. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Cain glanced at them, allowing the conversation for the moment.

She was surprised to see the gnome didn’t look angry or scared. He smiled at her. “I would have died hours ago if it hadn’t been for you. You gave me several hours more of life.”

Jak’s mouth was slack as she thought that through. “But that doesn’t make much sense. What’s the point if it’s only a few hours.”

“Every life, every second of it, is precious. I thank you for giving me yet a few more.”

“I will remind you,” said Cain, speaking to the Fae. “As I have all the others, that if you refuse my request I will seek out your families, you loved ones, and they will be next. But only after they experience the worst pain I am capable of inflicting.”

Jak felt her fist clench. Power still held her in place, or else she would have lashed out at the man right there, regardless of his abilities.

The gnome nodded, not bothering to fight. The dwarf stayed silent as he had since they brought him. But Jak glanced at him and could see tears in his eyes. They mirrored her own.

“Form the link with this girl,” Cain ordered. “If she succeeds, you live, if not, you know what happened to the others.” Turning to Jak, he leaned in closer. “And you, I know you can feel the power that lies beneath this lake of fire. You may use your abilities once the link is established. Retrieve it, and I may forgive all the other times you interfered with me.”

Jak swallowed. She had one chance. One tiny glimmer of hope that she could save the poor gnome and dwarf. All she had to do was get the Relic out from under the lake. Perhaps the link wouldn't kill them, or perhaps she could get it out quickly enough to let them live. But she had no choice but to try, even if it meant allowing a powerful Relic to find its way into Cain's hands.

"Now." Cain said, with a calm insistence that clearly said he would not be disobeyed.

She felt the gnome and dwarf touch her shoulders. She had linked once before, when Yewin had given her knowledge she needed to heal Naem. Would this be the same experience?

Without warning, warmth flooded through her and time stood still. All sounds were drowned out in an instant. Suddenly she felt aware of the molten lake, of the whole mountain even. This wasn't like her awareness of fire when she used her Flamedancer brand. This was something deeper, a powerful connection to the Earth they stood on and the flames that pooled before her. She could feel that fire stretch deep beneath them, without end. Was this what it was like to be a dwarf, or a gnome? It was more than just knowing the composition of the Earth, it was like being a part of creation, a mind behind the nature.

She could feel something else too, a pulsing far louder and stronger than she had ever felt before. There was indeed a Relic buried beneath the lake. It called to her.

Her Flamedancer brand activated and she pushed at the lake of lava. It parted ever so slightly, and she reached out with her newfound awareness given from the link. The Relic grew closer, curious to see if it might one day lie in the hands of its creators.

As suddenly as it had come, the awareness escaped her, leaving a void in its wake. She gasped for air. Something was wrong.

A choking sound came from behind her, and she turned to see the small gnome and his dwarf companion bent over backward and foaming at the mouths. Their skin darkened and their bodies almost...shriveled. Like a leaf drying out.

"I'm sorry," she said, tears flowing freely now. "I couldn't make it in time."

But the two could not hear her. They thrashed about for several seconds more, before they came to rest. Dead.

"A pity," Cain said. "I had high hopes for you. But you did prove one thing, which I find very useful."

Jak looked up at him, not saying a word, but her eyes bored into Cain with all the hatred she could muster.

He grinned at seeing her fury. "Now I know that it wasn't just me. I thought perhaps the Relic simply didn't want me, or the link

wouldn't work on someone of my power. But if you can't get it either, then I know the problem lies elsewhere. That object was meant to be retrieved at some point, we need only learn what it wants."

He chuckled and Jak felt the cold metal of her Void shackle clamp down around her wrist again. Cain led her out of the cavern, past the Watchers who had observed the whole thing. What did they think about this link? Did they even have any idea what Cain was trying to obtain?

She caught a glimpse of Nolm's face, still standing next to Captain Barrows. They both bore expressions Jak could not read, though the captain looked almost...curious.

She looked back at the dead Fae behind her, her tears continuing to stream down her cheeks as Cain led her away.

She had to get out! She had to!

# T

he imposed labor on Jak and the Fae only increased. She was given two guards, meaning she couldn't talk to one without the other knowing what she was up to. While Skellig occasionally made up one of the guards, she could say nothing of her identity in front of Jak.

Cain also increased her work hours and decreased the rations for all the slave workers. She spent most of her days now gasping for air through a dry mouth and swollen tongue. When she did receive water, she carefully savored every drop. In truth, she all but forgot about everything else going on around her, which was probably Cain's intent. He wanted her and the other Fae so miserable that they ignored any thoughts of escape or retribution. Oh, but Relics she needed water.

At night her growling stomach kept her awake. Noralim sometimes came to comfort her. "It will all work out in the end," he'd say, but Jak really had no idea how that would happen. What did even saying something like that do to help anybody?

Cain hadn't made her establish the link again, thank the ancestors. She wasn't sure she could bear going through that again, unwittingly killing those poor Fae. What bothered her more was that at a certain level, she had almost enjoyed the experience. Of course she was horrified by what happened, but the link was something completely otherworldly. It spoke to a primal part of her that craved connection to the surrounding world. And what's more, she had been allowed to exercise her powers if only for an instant. She still had Cain's mind-control band on her wrist that kept her from doing anything drastic, but it had still been nice to use her abilities if only for a moment.

That thought tugged at her. There was simply no way that she could see to escape her current situation. She couldn't remove the metal armbands that kept her mind captive, and she couldn't get someone else to do so. And yet there was one time where she had been free from at least the Void brand, during the link. Could she work that to her advantage somehow?

It was a thought that stayed with her throughout her labors, the

one thing that kept her going when she felt about ready to collapse from physical exhaustion. Perhaps if she could discreetly use one of her brands when Cain released her, something to make it easier to escape later. But of course, she wouldn't have that opportunity unless Cain decided to try linking her to the Fae again, and she didn't want that, knowing what it would do to them.

Some of the gnomes and dwarves were growing sick thanks to the non-stop work and low rations. Yet, there was nothing she could do. She didn't dare make any demands or aggressive moves towards the Watchers, not after what had happened the last time she stood up to them. Was she breaking? Was Cain getting to her? That thought was often what haunted her during the few hours of sleep she managed to get.

"Wake up," said a voice one morning, jerking her out of a fitful dream. A Watcher stood over her. It was Sergeant Nolm, and he wasn't accompanied by any of the others. A few nearby dwarves and gnomes glanced at him before doing their best to go back to sleep on the hard stone floor.

"Nolm?" Jak said. "What is it?"

"Captain Barrows would like to speak to you. I'm to take you to him."

He reached a hand forward to gingerly help her to her feet. She took a few steps to get her balance then followed Nolm out of the bare chamber and into a tunnel leading up to the Fae City. "Here," Nolm retrieved a small canteen out of his belt. "Some water, I know they haven't been giving you enough lately."

A small groan escaped Jak's lips as she eagerly accepted the canteen. The first sip burned on its way down her parched throat, but she didn't let it stop her from taking another gulp, and another. Soon, there was nothing left in the canteen. She passed it back to Nolm. "Thank you," she said. "I don't know how they can expect us to get any work done if we don't have enough food and water."

"I think it's stupid," Nolm said. Was that disgust in his voice? "I don't know why he would make you live that way. You don't seem that dangerous to me."

"I think maybe that's the point, he's trying to make me less dangerous. And it's working."

"I just don't see why it's necessary."

"It's like I said, not all leaders are good."

Nolm didn't argue with her this time on that point. Perhaps there was hope for him yet.

"Do you know what the Captain wants to see me about?" she asked after they had walked down the tunnel and entered another one in silence.

Nolm shrugged. "I don't. Maybe he's upset about how they've been treating you too."

"Perhaps," Jak said, but she doubted it. The Captain, from her little interaction with him, seemed a reasonable man, but also not one to openly disagree with the orders of his superior officer. Perhaps he wanted to question her about Cain, find out more about the man he was following. She could only hope he was willing to listen. They had to wonder what Cain wanted out of the lake.

She kept up a light conversation with Nolm, asking him about what he did lately, his patrols and other duties. But their conversation trailed off as they neared the city and began to see more Watchers about. Jak didn't want Nolm getting in trouble for talking to her.

They finally reached the massive cavern, lit by the small opening in the top of the mountain. Jak stared upward, squinting her eyes at the bright light above. Just that tiny glimpse of the sky sent waves of remorse coursing through her. She had to get out there. But how?

They entered a large tent that Jak recognized from her first time visiting the large cavern. "Ah, Sergeant Nolm, thank you." The captain was sitting at a table looking over some pieces of parchment covered with lines of charcoal. "That will be all."

Nolm saluted and retreated out the tent flap, leaving Jak alone with Captain Barrows. The man rose from his chair and walked around the table. "I apologize for how they've been treating you." He reached into his pouch and pulled forth a few dry crackers, offering them to Jak. She took them and shoved one into her mouth immediately, washing it down with more water that the captain offered her next. He waited patiently for her to finish. Already she could feel her mind grow sharper with the hydration and nutrients. Relics, that felt so much better!

"There," said the captain, retreating again to his chair. "Have a seat." He indicated the chair on the opposite side of the table. She obeyed, finding the chair to be hard, but not uncomfortable. It had been days since she'd sat in a chair. It was amazing how much she found she missed that small luxury. Before she was either standing to work, or lying down to sleep.

"There are reports of missing Fae," said Barrows once she was settled. She met his eyes, feeling fear sink into her again. Barrows took note of the look in her eyes. "Ah, so that means something to you."

"No...I mean, yes it does. But I had nothing to do with it." This wasn't good. If Fae were missing that meant they might start asking her questions, like if she knew where they had gone. If Cain asked those questions she would have to answer, and she would give away the location of the rebels, and Skellig's position as a spy within their ranks. It could mean disaster for everyone.

“I know that, young one. We’ve had at least two guards watching you around the clock. There is no way you could have helped without us knowing.”

“So why am I here?” she asked.

“Because, as I said to you the first time we met, you intrigue me. The Fae have begun to take notice of you, and it makes me wonder if this sudden increase in missing workers doesn’t have something to do with you, albeit indirectly. Have you seen anything that would confirm this? Are there others who could be in a position to help you? One of my men turned traitor, perhaps?”

He was on the scent. Surely the missing Fae had something to do with Skellig or the rebels, smuggling dwarves and gnomes out when they had a chance. Jak had planned on helping the Fae in the same way not too long ago. Now she knew the potential costs outweighed the benefits. It was a dangerous risk Skellig was taking, one that might get them all killed if Cain found out.

“As you said, I’ve been under guard this whole time, and kept starving and constantly working.” Then trying to sound casual, she added, “Does your general know about the missing Fae?”

Captain Barrows leaned back in his chair. “I do not bother him with the minor managerial items. Besides, he’s far more obsessed with that lake of fire.”

“Why do you follow him?” she couldn’t help asking, feeling a slight relief that Cain wouldn’t be interrogating her on this subject just yet.

“Why? Because he is my commanding officer, appointed by Queen Telma herself. How could I do otherwise?” Jak slowly let out a breath. “That does seem to be the common question. Do you even know what he’s doing? Why he’s killing those Fae at the lake?”

“He’s attempting to retrieve a Pillar of Eternity,” said Barrows, offhand.

Jak blinked. “You mean you know about that?”

“Of course, it was one of the first things he shared with us. He said he could feel it beneath the surface with his Telekinesis, but that it was guarded in such a way that it required the Fae to link with him. A fascinating thing, that. Of course, I’ve had my doubts that there’s really anything there. None of our other Telekinetics sensed anything.”

Good, he was beginning to doubt. Jak managed to refrain from mentioning that she felt the presence of the Pillar of Eternity as well, or at least that of a powerful Relic. No need to confirm the reasons Cain used to keep the Watchers placated.

“He’s no ordinary Telekinetic,” said Jak quietly.

“So you mentioned the first time we met. But I understand your

hatred of him given the ordeal he's put you through. But I'm curious, how is it that you managed to link with the Fae when none of my men could? Only the general seemed capable of it before now, and we never understood that either. He claims it's a unique skill, and only one out of thousands is capable of it. I'd prefer a more definitive answer."

"You're not going to believe me."

"Try me."

Jak shrugged. "Alright. I'm what was once called an Oren, someone gifted with the ability to give multiple brands. Your General Doran is another. I don't know if that is responsible for being able to link, but it is the only thing that the two of us have in common."

"You're saying the general can give multiple brands? But he is not a Gifter."

"Not that you can see. He has other abilities hidden from view. Have you heard of Colonel Kuldain?"

A flicker of recognition lit Barrow's eyes. "I have heard of him, yes. Reports were that he met an untimely end out west. I understand it had to do with a demon attack."

"He also had multiple brands, and they gave him abilities I've never seen in an ordinary man. He was like a demon, but greater. And he could change form, which allowed him to disguise his brands from the rest. He didn't die in the demon attack, he was part of that attack."

Barrows narrowed his eyes at her. "How do you know all of this?"

Jak hesitated. "I was there." Best not to mention that she had been the one to kill Kuldain.

"Well, that is quite a story, but you'll understand if it is a bit far-fetched."

"I'm here. You can see my brands, you know it's possible."

"I do, but that hardly means that the rest of what you say is true. But don't worry, I will take what you've said under advisement. I am not blind to truth if it stares me in the face, so I will watch to discover evidence of what you say."

That was honestly more than Jak was hoping for. "Thank you!" she said, her face brightening a bit.

"Bear in mind that I still have no reason to trust you, other than the fact that I find you to be intelligent and reasonable, but that could all be an act for all I know. And I will not take steps against the general without probable cause. And I'm afraid that is unlikely to happen."

"But you're okay with his continuous slaughter of the dwarves and gnomes? Why won't anyone speak up for them?"

"A necessary evil, as is often the case when progress needs to be

made.” The look on Barrow’s face was troubled, but resigned. “The workers have increased our armor stock a hundred fold, and of a quality not known anywhere in the world. With it we could have the ability to form a nation that would cause other nations to pale in comparison. And if the general is correct, and there is a Pillar of Eternity under Dragon Lake, then obtaining that is worth almost any cost.”

“You don’t even know what it does,” Jak said, incredulous. Did he really believe all of that? That the sacrifice of the Fae was justified for the good of his people?

“We know it’s one of the three most powerful Relics ever created. We know it gives its user power over creation itself. With that kind of power we could create a safe haven for all, Fae and humans alike.”

“You really think the Fae will have a place in whatever paradise you end up creating for yourselves?”

“As I said, their suffering is a necessary evil. But what is a little suffering if it results in prosperity for everyone? I must prioritize the many above the few.”

Jak shook her head. Barrows was as blind as the rest of them. She had thought him level headed, and while he clearly didn’t see the Fae as demons like some, his views were equally disturbing.

“There is one more thing that I must bring up before you go back to your work. Olu!” he yelled out a name. Outside, Jak heard shuffling feet as another Watcher entered the tent behind her. He was dragging a struggling figure behind him, who was gagged and bound both hand and foot. Jak felt the last of her hope vanish in an instant.

The bound figure was Skellig. The Watcher deposited the former major on the floor beside the table Jak and the captain sat at. Skellig’s eyes met hers, and Jak’s hand rose to her mouth. Her last hope was caught.

“It appears you lied to me earlier, you are connected to the missing dwarves,” said Captain Barrows. “We found this one attempting to let an older dwarf go. Upon closer inspection I realized that I knew this one. Major Skellig, formally assigned to Colonel Kuldain’s ranks, and recently relieved of duty.”

Skellig’s eyes never left Jak’s. There was regret in those eyes, but something else as well. It was almost like confidence, or that she was trying to communicate confidence. Some last hope to keep Jak from giving up. But Jak could see no hope now. Cain would find out about this and interrogate her further. They would find the rebel hideout and all would be lost.

“...I don’t know her,” she said in a desperate attempt to smooth things over.

“Don’t dig yourself deeper, girl,” Captain Barrows was sterner now,

his face like that of a disappointed father, disciplining a child. “You’ve already admitted that you were there when Kuldain died in the battle of Foothold.”

“Please don’t hurt her. I can cooperate. Just give me a chance to explain.”

Barrows stood and placed both hands on the table in front of him, staring Jak down. “I already gave you plenty of chances. And you lied about your involvement and knowledge. I even waited to tell the general so that I could talk to you in private before this blows up in your face. But you continue to take the position of opposition, feeding lies about our commander to my men, making them doubt the line of authority.”

“But it’s true, it’s all true!” Jak pleaded. If Barrows told Cain it was all over.

“Remove them both. Take them to the dungeons we discovered below.” Barrows said to the Watcher guard, then pointed at Jak. “And that one is not to roam freely anymore until the General says otherwise.”

Rough hands attached themselves to her arms and began dragging her out, knocking over the chair she was sitting in. She desperately tried to meet his eyes. “Please, please don’t do this. You can still help these people.”

Barrows ignored her as the Watchers dragged her away. She saw no sign of Nolm, who must have retreated after dropping her off. Had his involvement been nothing more than a way of giving Jak some false sense of security on her way to meet Barrows? Did he even believe her at all, or was he like Barrows, blinded by his apparent concern for the greater good.

These thoughts haunted her right up until they threw her into a dark, cold prison.

“Y

ou will tell me...everything.” Cain’s voice was colder than ice. “I should have questioned you from the start, torn every memory out of your mind until it was nothing but an empty shell.” He leaned forward over Jak, who lay pinned to the table in Cain’s quarters once again.

Jak’s lips quivered. But she couldn’t stop herself from saying. “Y...yes.”

“Very good. Start with the former Major Skellig. How did she come to this mountain with you?”

“W...we met outside the mountain. She came here after reports came in that there were Fae here.”

Cain’s eyebrows lifted. “Reports from whom.”

“The Shadow Fae.” Jak replied through clenched teeth. Try as she would, she could not stop herself from speaking. “They have a spy network everywhere.”

Cain looked thoughtful. “Yes, I suppose they would be good at that kind of work. And did any of your precious kinsfolk accompany you here?”

“No,” Jak said quickly. Too quickly.

“And what of others? Have you any other allies in the mountain?”

Jak clamped her mouth shut, throwing all her will into keeping her jaw from opening. She thought the bones in her mouth might break with the strain. But she could not let him know about the others. She could not!

“YOU WILL TELL ME!” Cain’s hand snapped forward and locked onto Jak’s forehead. Darkness flooded her body and pain lashed her on all sides. Her eyes wide, she screamed, not only from the pain, but from the effort of fighting Cain’s will. White hot knives were stabbing her, repeatedly, over and over again. She could not imagine worse pain. It tore at her, put her back together, and tore at her again.

“THERE ARE REBELS IN THE MOUNTAIN!” The phrase ripped its way out of her throat. She screamed. “AND A BRIGHT FAE.”

The pain ceased, though Jak could still feel every part of her body

tremble with its memory. She gasped for air and twitched repeatedly. She was in shock. With tears blurring her vision, she blinked at Cain who stood gazing into thin air, lost in thought.

“A Bright Fae, you say. Well, that’s something at least. Perhaps he will prove more valuable than these Fae of Earth and Fire that have disappointed me so.”

“Don’t hurt them.”

He peered at her, curiosity in his gaze. “All of this and yet you still choose to defy me.”

The pain returned.

Screams escaped her throat once again as the invisible knives wracked her body. What kind of power could cause pain like this? It was beyond what she even thought a human was capable of enduring.

Once again, the pain ceased, and she panted for air. A different kind of pain tore through her as she coughed, her lungs strained and her throat raw from screaming.

Cain leaned in close. “Tell me where I can find them.”



WHEN CAIN WAS DONE with Jak, Watchers came to drag her to the dungeons where Skellig was also being held.

“Are you okay?” Skellig asked once the guards had left.

But Jak could not respond. Her body still felt the aftereffects of her torment. But worse, she felt the guilt of betraying her friends.

After a long while of sitting in darkness, she said, “Everyone I associate with ends up hurting.”

Silence greeted her at first, then Skellig’s voice emerged from behind her. “Nonsense, girl. The world’s far too large and cruel for you to be the cause of all their suffering. These people were enslaved long before you got here.”

“I tried to save one of the gnomes, and they ended up killing him for it. And earlier when I led the first attempt at an escape, our exit was blocked and everything became worse. Now you’re captured and the rest soon will be.”

She knew that the only reason Cain kept her alive was because she was able to link with the Fae. He had stripped her of all secrets, and she had given in, unable to resist. She told him about the rebel hideout, about Yewin, indeed everything that had happened to her all the way back to the attack on her village.

Cain knew everything now. And it terrified Jak what he might do with that information.

“Don’t blame yourself.” She heard Skellig call from the other end

of their dark cell. They were in some kind of holding cell that the gnomes and dwarves must have built a long time ago, though clearly no one had been kept here in years, not before the Watchers arrived. It was completely dark, and the ceiling was low, something Jak had unfortunately discovered the first time she tried to stand. She stayed lying down now.

Jak didn't move, her cheek resting along the cold, damp floor of the cell. "I just need to find some way to fight the suffering without causing more of it, without associating myself with anyone I could hurt."

There was a pause, then, "Jak. You're a good girl, but that is the stupidest thing I have ever heard." The familiar tone of command was in Skellig's voice, and it took Jak by surprise.

"But..."

"No buts. Have you ever seen one man or woman fight an army? Even a powerful warrior doesn't stand a chance. Even a girl like you, capable and possessing powers the rest of us don't. Even you can't stand up to armies."

"No one stands a chance against their general. He's more powerful than any of us."

"Yes, you can't defeat him. I can't defeat him. From what you've told me, there probably isn't a person anywhere in the world that can defeat him."

"So what's the point then?" Jak interrupted. "People will only get hurt if I try to fight a being like him, if he doesn't kill me first. Our best bet is to run away, find some obscure corner of the world where he won't find us."

"And leave others to suffer instead? Not everyone can run."

Jak stayed silent that time. Skellig was right, of course. These Fae were the prime example, enslaved by Cain and the Watchers with little to no possibility for escape.

"Jak," Skellig's tone was insistent. "No one can defeat him *alone*. But together we have a chance. He can't stand up alone to an army any better than you could. We must work together!"

Jak let that wash over her. She supposed there was some wisdom in that. Jak had been too preoccupied with what she could and couldn't do, that she hadn't put much thought into what others could do to help.

"..." but just before she could answer, the door to the dungeon creaked open and light flooded the rooms, creating long shadows from the bars to each cell. It wasn't the pale light surrounding the city, or the warm light of fire. It was a golden light.

"Yewin!" she cried as she recognized the light's hue. He was alive! Thank goodness. Watchers held the Bright Fae by the arms, and more

came in with other captives. Jak rose and pressed herself against the bars to her cell to make them all out. She recognized them all as the Watchers carried or dragged them in. These were the rebels, and Girwirt was among them. They brought Noralim in as well, even though he had been with the slaves. Jak had given up his name too when Cain interrogated her.

There were only a few cells available, the dwarves and gnomes likely didn't have that many prisoners before, so they had to buddy up. A Watcher brandished his spear at Jak, indicating she should get away from the bars. She did so and he opened the gate, throwing two gnomes into the room before shutting and locking the door once again.

One of the gnomes was Girwirt. He only glanced at Jak before finding a corner opposite her and lying down, facing the wall. The other gnome sat next to him, leaning against the stone. Unfortunately, Yewin was one or two doors down, but his natural light bounced off the walls enough that Jak could see her surroundings. There was a small, barred window between each cell. Jak knew Skellig was in the one next to her based on where her voice had come from.

Once the Watchers left, locking the outer door with a loud clang, they all sat there in relative silence for a long while.

Should she say something? She felt like she should say something. "I'm sorry everyone." Jak said eventually. "I had no choice."

"You always have a choice," Girwirt said, still turned away from her.

"No, I mean, I literally had no choice. See this brand? It forces you to do what whoever gave it to you says."

Yewin's voice came from down the hall. "Are you saying there's a new brand I hadn't heard about?"

Jak almost smiled. Yewin almost rivaled her in her search for knowledge. Girwirt rolled over just enough to take a look at the shackle Jak indicated, then he rolled back towards the wall again. "Stupid giants and their stupid tricks," he mumbled.

Just then Jak noticed something. Girwirt and the other gnome both had a similar metal armband to what she wore, there was something inscribed on them as well. "Hey, you all have Void brands on those."

"Yes," this time it was Skellig who answered. "They gave me one too the moment they found me."

Well, of course that made sense. Skellig was a Flamedancer and they couldn't just let her roam free without some kind of restraint. "But why give them to the Fae?"

"I told you not to call us that," Girwirt said from his corner.

"They gave one to all of us." Yewin called. "I think it has a similar effect on our abilities as it does for yours."

Well, that was interesting. So a Void brand could affect the magic of a Fae. That was too bad, because if what she knew about the gnomes was true, they'd have the ability to melt the metal bars and let them all out.

"I'm sorry," she said again, this time addressing everyone. "For getting you into this mess."

"It would have happened eventually," said Skellig, reaffirming that this wasn't Jak's fault. "You don't have to feel bad."

"I would kind of like it if she felt bad," said Girwirt.

"Don't worry, Girwirt." This time it was Noralim's voice coming from the cell right next to Jak's. He must have been in with Skellig. "The young Jak hasn't stopped fighting for us yet, and I don't believe she will give up now."

Jak swallowed. Why did Noralim always seem to have such faith in her and the possible outcomes of their predicaments. Didn't he realize that she was as powerless as any of them? She couldn't help him with a Void brand blocking her powers, and the Mind Control brand forcing her to..."

An idea suddenly popped into her mind. The Void brand. What was it fully capable of?

"Yewin?" she called out. "What do you know about Void brands?"

"Not much, other than the basics." Yewin called back. "They're used to repress abilities of individuals and other Relics."

Relics, yes. It could repress the ability of Relics. She had seen Gabriel do this by encasing a Relic in a box with a Void brand. If it worked on a brand that powerful, could it possibly work on a lesser Relic, even if it was branded with a brand they didn't understand? She stared down at her arms, where both brands lay. Perhaps if she could get the Void brand off and clamp it around her mind control brand. But no, there was no way that would work. Apart from the fact that she had been ordered not to take off her shackles, it would be nearly as impossible to clamp the one with the Void brand around the other. That limited a lot of what she could do. But it was definitely an idea worth pursuing. Perhaps if she had another material to work with, one a little more flexible.

"Does anyone have any leather I could use?" she asked idly.

Girwirt turned to look at her, his face confused. "What in the dragon's folly do you need leather for? Do we look like we keep a lot of animals in this mountain to make leather with?"

"I have a little," said Skellig. "They took most of my armor, but I still have the shin guards. There are leather straps attached. Why do you need it?"

"It's just an idea, but it might be important," Jak replied. "A Void brand in the leather might allow me to wrap it around the mind

control brand, eliminating its effects. And technically, Cain's instructions only prevent me from taking it off, he didn't say anything about trying to render it inert. If a new Void brand works, it will stop the mind control brand from working, and I'll no longer be compelled to obey Cain's orders.

She heard some shuffling from the cell next to her and then a hand appeared in the small window connecting them. The hand held a few leather straps. Jak rose to her feet to retrieve the leather. "Thank you," she said.

"Whatever helps," Skellig replied. "I think it's a good idea. Though I don't know how you can brand it with your Void brand preventing you."

"I can't do anything with it now, but it may come in handy later." She tucked the leather strap into one pocket.

She spent most of the next few hours studying the Void brand attached to her metal armband. It was a fairly straight forward brand, just a line standing in the center of a circle, almost touching the edges but not quite. She tried to remember what she'd learned about it in her research at the college.

Usually a brand required the Gifter to imagine it in some unique manner, particular to the brand itself. A Flamedancer brand required you to imagine it moving about like fire. A Thunder brand needed speed of thought. If Jak could remember correctly, the Void brand required thinking of...nothing at all. She wasn't sure she could do that. It couldn't be easy to make your mind go completely blank.

But it was all she had to go on at the moment. Now she just had to wait for an opportunity, knowing of only one that would inevitably come. But it had already been days since Cain had forced her to link the last time, and that had come as a punishment. Perhaps now, with all of the rebels rounded up, he would make her try again. Perhaps then she'd have a chance to use one of her abilities discreetly.

She stared at Girwirt in his corner, and the other gnome sitting next to him. Unfortunately her plan had one major flaw. It would mean some of the Fae would have to die.

# S

ure enough, she had barely begun to doze off when she heard the sound of a door opening. The dread in the pit of her stomach increased, and she knew who had stepped in.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen one of the Bright Fae. I’m sure we’ll have uses for you later.” Cain said further down the hall, closer to where Yewin’s cell would be. Jak scrambled to her feet and heard several others around her do the same.

“I’m bursting with anticipation,” Yewin responded flatly.

“Hm, indeed. Well, I’ll definitely come back to you sooner or later.” His voice drifted as he spoke, moving in Jak’s direction. She braced herself. She still felt a hint of terror as he came into view and met her gaze, an urge to run or hide, but at least she could stare back. That was progress at least. There was very little he could take from her now that he held all of her friends. Short of killing all of them, which was certainly something he could and probably would do, he had already done all he could. It did no good for her to cower before him. She was not afraid to die.

“I’ve decided it’s time to try again,” Cain said to Jak. “But now that we have such an increase in rebels and escaped slaves, perhaps we could increase the number a bit.”

Jak closed her eyes. She was afraid he might try that, linking with more than just two Fae. She wasn’t sure if numbers did anything to help, but even if it worked, it would mean more lives lost as Cain gained possession of a Pillar of Eternity.

“Bring her,” Cain said and several Watchers stepped in behind him. “And bring two pairs of these disgusting Fae this time. Leave the bright one for now. We’ll try a few new experiments first before bringing him in.”

Jak said nothing as rough hands took her again and led her away. She didn’t look to see if they had taken Girwirt, Noralim, or any others she knew. It didn’t matter who they brought to die. A life was a life, and she would feel the weight of their deaths no matter who they were.

A crowd gathered around them as they walked to Dragon Lake. Jak thought she had been a curiosity before, but by now word must have gotten out about the rebels, and a lot of Watchers gathered to see them carried off and executed. Or at least, the four Fae would be executed. Jak would continue to live, to feel the full weight of their deaths.

Perhaps they wouldn't die this time. Perhaps having more Fae would work. But surely Cain had already tried that. What was the point of trying again except as a means of executing the rebels?

Soon, Jak felt the burning heat as she was forced to kneel in front of Dragon Lake once again. She stared at the bright, glowing liquid, feeling the hum of the Relic in its depths. Was it really a Pillar of Eternity, and what would it do if she or Cain got their hands on it? She had no doubt that Cain would get to it eventually. Even if she and all the slaves somehow escaped, Cain was not one to give up. He would find a way to get to that Relic, one way or another. What could he do with that kind of power? If only she knew what the Relic did.

She glanced back at the two gnomes and two dwarves they had forced to come with them. To her relief, none of them were Girwirt or Noralim, but that didn't stop tears from coming to her eyes as she recognized the four of them from the rebel camp. They had been there when she first arrived in Mt. Harafast. They had greeted her openly, once Girwirt had explained the situation to them. And now they were going to die because of her.

Well, she had to ensure that their deaths were not in vain.

Cain released the shackle with the Void brand attached. Her powers suddenly came alive in her mind, ready to be used.

"You know how it goes," Cain whispered in her ear. "Do not use your powers until I give you the signal. You will not try to escape. And you will link with these creatures to bring me the Pillar of Eternity."

"I know," Jak replied. She set her jaw, and twisted to see her Fae companions. They all looked at her, looked *to* her. She pushed aside the urge to apologize yet again for her failure to keep them safe. She had said that far too often of late. It would do her no good now. Perhaps with four of them the link would be strong enough to keep them from dying. But she didn't count on it. She could only do one thing to try and make their sacrifices worth it.

Turning back towards the lake, she sat back on her heels as Cain spoke with the Fae behind her, threatening their fellow rebels and others of their kind should they choose to disobey him and not establish the link. They did not protest. They knew if they didn't perform the link, then they would die anyway, and Cain would just find someone else to do it instead. Jak closed her eyes and a tear

dropped from one of them as she felt four arms touch her shoulders from behind. Now was the time.

She subtly inserted one hand into her pocket. And closed her eyes. The link began.

As before, a pulsing awareness overtook her. She could feel the Earth like it was a part of herself, feel the hot lava that boiled down to the center of that earth. Something about having four people in the link did seem to make a difference. Her awareness was far broader than before. Mountain ranges stretched out to the east and west. She knew every peak, every valley. It was as much a part of her as she was of it.

But one isolated Relic dragged her back to her current location. There it was again, the Pillar of Eternity. She could almost visualize it now, not a pillar of stone like one saw in the caves, nor a pillar of marble like the ones she'd seen in the Royal Cathedral at Skyecliff. This was a rod, a bit taller than she was, and pulsing with power.

"What are you?" she spoke aloud. Or had it spoken to her?

Once again, she sensed a curiosity from the Relic. It wanted someone to hold it, to wield its power once again. But its creators had kept it here, ensuring that only the worthy could take it. Was she worthy? The question loomed in her mind.

*I think I am.* Jak thought. *But others are trying to use me to get to you.*

*Take me with you.* Jak could almost feel the statement resonate in her bones. The Relic pushed closer, though not yet touching the surface of the lake.

*I can't.* Jak said. *If he possesses you, he will twist your magic to his own purposes. He will dominate everyone I know and love.*

*Then you must come for me.* The Relic responded in her mind. *When the time is right.*

*I will. But I don't know if I can defeat Cain. He is too powerful.*

*Come for me.* The Relic repeated.

Jak's eyes snapped open as the link suddenly winked out in her mind. No longer was she the mountain, the Earth. She was Jak, small, insignificant by comparison.

Screams came from behind, and the grips of the four Fae loosened and fell off of her completely. She had only moments now before Cain put the Void band back on her. Now was the time to act. Her hand was still in her pocket and a tingling, almost stinging sensation ran through that hand as she activated her Gifter brand. She just had to hope that Cain did not see the light of her activated brand bleeding through the fabric. In a rush, she let her mind go blank.

Cain growled behind her. "She was so close! The link lasted longer this time. Take her!"

Jak slipped her hand out of her pocket just in time for the

Watchers to seize her again and snap the Void band back in place. Instantly she lost that comforting sense of their power. It was beyond her reach now.

“I want her taken back to the dungeons, and I want you to give double rations to each of the prisoners.”

“Double rations, sir?” The question came from Captain Barrows, who stood at the back of the group of Watcher onlookers. He took several steps forward now.

“I don’t want any of them dying because they are too weak. They will need their strength for tomorrow. When we try again. I will do it myself this time.”

“So you no longer need the girl?” Barrows asked, glancing at Jak. She met his gaze with cold fury.

“A while longer, but she will be executed soon,” Cain confirmed. “There is nothing left that I can learn from her.”

“Very well, sir.” Barrows clasped his hands behind his back. “And how many of the rebels should I bring tomorrow?”

Cain shot a glance at Jak, and his lips turned upward in a gleeful sneer. “All of them.”

Jak swallowed but did not give Cain the satisfaction of seeing any kind of distress on her face. She met his eyes, stare for stare. Cain may have had the upper hand, and he may have been more powerful than Jak, but she would find a way to defeat him, if it was the last thing she did. Cain was an Oren, perhaps one of the strongest ever to wander the Earth. But Jak was an Oren too, and she would find a way to increase her powers until they matched Cain’s.

Confidence flooded her as they led her away, back to the dungeons. But that confidence rested on one crucial hope. Every ounce of her wanted to pull out the leather strap in her pocket, to see if her plan had worked. But she didn’t dare, not yet.

They deposited her back in her cell, locking the large metal doors with a clang. Then they left. The Watchers, Cain, Barrows. They were all gone.

“What happened?” Skellig said from one cell over. Jak looked around the room, able to see from the golden light bouncing through the dungeon from where Yewin undoubtedly lay. Girwirt sat in the corner of her room, his face dark but his eyes focused on Jak.

Jak fished in her pocket and pulled out the thin strap of leather. This had to work. It had to! They had only one chance.

The leather strap hung in front of her face as she carefully observed its rough, worn texture.

Etched into the leather was a single, perfect Void brand.

“I

think I've done it.” Jak breathed, feeling excitement build within her.

“Done what?” Girwirt said from his corner. Jak heard some shuffling and Skellig's face appeared in the small window connecting their cells.

Jak held up the piece of leather for Skellig to see. “I think I've created a Void brand. I did it while I was temporarily free at the lake.”

“Well, don't dawdle, girl. Try it!” Skellig was excited too, Jak could tell. The woman was far older and more experienced than Jak, but right then she looked like a little girl waiting to see what her parents had bought her on her naming day. She clutched at the bars in an effort to see Jak better.

Jak took the strap and placed it on her mind-control band. She didn't feel any resistance. Cain hadn't ordered her to negate the magic of the shackle, only that she couldn't take it off.

She continued to wrap the leather around the metal and tied the ends together with one hand. Everyone in the room waited.

“Did it work?” Yewin called from further down. He must have been listening in.

“I don't know,” Jak said. “I don't feel any different.”

“Do something the general told you not to do?”

Jak looked back down at the leather-covered shackle. Well, she hadn't been able to even attempt to take it off before. She'd tried once or twice but instantly found herself paralyzed and unable to continue. She grabbed the metal and began to pull, trying to see if she could slip her hand through the slim band.

Even though the band was too narrow to remove in that way, she still managed to try. It was working! Just to make sure, she took the leather with the Void brand off, and tried again. Instantly she felt her hand freeze in place when she tried to slide the metal off. “I think it's working!” Jak ran her hands through her hair. She had done it! The Void brand was doing what it was supposed to.

“Great!” Girwirt called from his corner. “Now how do you propose

we get out of here. You still have that other brand thingy keeping you from using your fancy tricks.”

Jak glanced down at her other wrist. It was true, she still had the Void brand there. All of them had restraints with a Void brand on them. And they couldn’t just take them off, not unless at least one of them had the use of their brands to do so, or unless they had the keys. But she had no idea who kept those. Probably someone like Captain Barrows, or Cain himself. There was no use going that route.

But it would only take one of them to get free in order to free the rest.

“Girwirt,” she said. “If you didn’t have the Void brand, could you get us out of here? Melt the bars or something?”

“Of course I could,” said Girwirt, his arms folded. “But if you haven’t noticed I have one of them Void brands that keeps me from doing just that.”

“I wonder,” Jak tapped a finger to her lips. “Let me try something.”

She stood, her body hunched over due to the low ceiling, and crossed the room to where Girwirt sat. She took the Void-branded leather and wrapped it around the metal armband that kept Girwirt from using his abilities. Could a Void brand negate the power of another Void brand? Or would it just compound the ability? They were about to find out. Jak finished tying the leather around Girwirt’s wrist, then sat back to see what happened.

Girwirt’s eyes widened. “Dragons and dangerous derelict dirty dung beetles,” he breathed, raising his arm in front of his face to stare at it.

Jak smiled. “Did it work?”

“Lass,” he looked her in the eye. “I dare say it might have.”

He stood for the first time since the Watchers had brought him to the cell and strode over to the iron bars that made up the door. Taking hold of two of them, he scrunched up his face and instantly the metal began to glow. An instant later and Girwirt released his grip as the hot metal broke apart and melted into a shining pool on the ground.

“You’re amazing, Girwirt!” said Jak, running to the opening. “Now we just need to find a way to get these shackles off.”

“I can melt those right off for you.”

“No!” Jak retracted her arms so that Girwirt couldn’t reach them. “Um, we burn when hot metal touches us, Girwirt.”

“Silly giants, so limited,” Girwirt grumbled.

“I could do it!” Noralim joined the conversation from several cells down, close to where the light from Yewin’s body originated. He nearly shouted in excitement.

“Shhh, Noralim, we don’t want to accidentally bring one of the guards,” said Jak.

Girwirt didn't seem to care. "No you couldn't," he shouted back. "Dwarves can't shift matter."

"Not as a solid," said Noralim. Jak and Girwirt stepped out of the cell and followed the dwarf's voice until they saw him. He was clutching the bars of his own cells and his cheeks were pink with excitement. "But if we link, we could melt the bars and mold them into a key or lockpick or something."

"Hm, now that could work," Girwirt said, running a hand through his flaming hair.

"I say let's try it!" Noralim was positively beaming. Together he and Girwirt grasped each other with one hand through the gaps in the iron. Girwirt placed his other hand on one of the bars and melted it down as he had the others.

Girwirt initiated a link. It was as Jak had seen before, a faint outline surrounded the two Fae. With the protective blessing of the link, Noralim felt no pain as Girwirt's magic melted the Void brand off his arm. Then Girwirt put a hand on Noralim's shoulder, freeing up Noralim's hands to mold the metal. Noralim dropped most of the excess metal, and Jak had to jump to the side to avoid bits of the stuff splashing on the ground.

Noralim was concentrating, molding the hot yellow metal like he would clay. He rolled his hands together to thin it out, then he plucked off the top of that narrow tube and bent the tip. The metal was growing cooler now, not quite as malleable as before, but Noralim still managed to form several small spikes. Some with pointed tips, others with small hooks at the end.

"There," Noralim deposited the small picks on the ground where they began to fade and cool. "One of those should do the trick."

Once the lock picks cooled, Jak and Girwirt distributed them to Yewin, Skellig, and the other dwarves and gnomes in the chamber. Jak began to worry as their muttering grew louder. All it would take was one Watcher to check on them and raise the alarm. Without wasting time, she strapped the leather Void brand on her mind control brand, to render it inert, then set to work trying to open the lock to her shackle.

It took some doing, but after several minutes, she felt resistance on the lock pick and a split-second later, a satisfying click and the metal Void band fell off her arm.

Instantly a surge of elation flooded through her as she felt her Strength return as well as the Flamedancing and Healing abilities. She wrapped the leather Void brand around her mind control brand again, then with all that Strength coursing through her veins, she grabbed the shackle and broke the lock with a satisfying crunch. The metal clanged on the stone, where Jak removed the leather Void brand and

breathed a sigh of relief. She was, for the first time in weeks, completely free.

There were still several dwarves and gnomes who hadn't unlocked themselves yet, so Jak assisted in ripping off what they couldn't unlock. Yewin was the last one she freed. Together they began gathering outside the cell doors. Jak counted about thirty of them, in total.

"Well, it seems you're about as resourceful as I thought," Yewin said, rubbing the spot where his Void brand had been. His natural light seemed a little brighter now.

"Yes, but what are our next steps?" said Skellig, coming up beside them. "There will be guards outside. I scoped the place out when they took us here, and we can probably take them out without anyone else noticing. But then what? We still can't get through the entrance."

Jak nodded. "And we can't take out their leader, Cain." She held up a hand to quiet Skellig who was about to protest. "No, Skellig. I know we're stronger together, but we're going to need a lot more of us before we can come close to challenging him."

"So what then? Our old hideout isn't an option either," Girwirt said coming up next to Jak. "If we can't hide, leave, or fight, we might as well just stay here."

"Cain was planning to kill all of you tomorrow," Jak said.

"Ah...so better not to remain here then."

"I think there might be a way." Jak put her hands on her hips and looked down at Girwirt. "But you're not going to like it."

Girwirt folded his arms. "I don't like half of your ideas, giant."

Jak ignored him. "The Relic underneath Dragon Lake. I think we need to get it before Cain does."

Yewin put a hand to his chin, and Skellig's brow furrowed, but Girwirt laughed. "But that's impossible. This Cain person has already tried and failed. You've tried and failed. And besides, supposedly the only way to get to it is...." he trailed off, comprehension finally dawning on his face. "Oh no, you can't be serious."

"It's risky I know, but..."

"Risky? Risky?! It's suicide on a mass scale."

"I'm not sure it will be," Jak said. "The last time Cain forced me to do it, it felt..."

"You're suggesting we link?" Yewin said, his face still a mask of thoughtfulness.

Jak squared her shoulders. If Yewin disagreed to this, it would never work. "I am."

"Foolish giant." Girwirt threw up his hands in exasperation. The rest of the prisoners had gathered around them now, some looking equally as troubled. "Haven't you noticed what happens when we link

with you or the other giant?"

"I would like to hear what she has to say, little master," Yewin said softly. "I very much doubt she has forgotten the consequences of establishing the link."

Girwirt grew silent. Jak nodded to Yewin in gratitude. "I know what you've seen. Every time I or Cain have linked with one of you, it has resulted in their deaths. I understand that, and I won't force anyone who is unwilling to participate. But...I think it may be our only hope to defeat Cain and escape this place."

No one said anything, so she went on. "I linked with Yewin once, and though it nearly killed him, he survived. Earlier today I linked with four of your comrades, and though they did eventually perish, the link was stronger and lasted longer. Cain was going to bring all of you tomorrow to link with him together. And I'm afraid it might have worked." She looked around at everyone gathered there. "We have to get to it before he does."

"And just what does this Relic thingy do?" said Girwirt. "Our ancestors warned us not to disturb what lay beneath the lake."

"I don't know," Jak said. "But let me ask you this, if Cain wants it so badly, are you really willing to wait for him to get it? Because you know he will find a way eventually."

Girwirt didn't have an answer for that. He frowned and adjusted his shoulders, thinking it through.

"I say we give it a try!" Jak's head turned to see Noralim beaming at her from among the small crowd. "Young Jak has fought for us since she got here."

"Yeah, but look where it's led us." One of the other dwarves said. "We wouldn't be here at all if it weren't for her."

Jak winced. That remark fell a little too close to home.

"And which among you think that we would have accomplished anything in the long run?" Noralim shot back. "We got a few of our companions out, but how long before these Watchers discovered our secret exit, or our hideout. We were lucky they didn't question Girwirt when they first captured him, or we would be here much earlier than we expected. I think if anyone has a chance of standing up to these giants, it's young Jak."

A few of the dwarves and gnomes looked thoughtful at this, but several turned expectantly to face Girwirt, as if he was somehow the deciding factor for all of this. But the gnome was running his hands through his hair and tapping his foot. He clearly wasn't sure if he liked the idea.

"I for one am willing," Yewin said.

Jak turned to him in surprise. "Are you sure? You remember what happened the last time."

“Remember my nature, young Jak. I am a creature of light and truth. I sense truth in your words. I believe the only way to defeat our enemy is to uncover the Relic beneath Dragon Lake.”

Suddenly they heard a lock catch behind them. Jak spun, but Skellig was already moving. “What’s all the noise in here?” said a guard, poking his head in.

Skellig shot a small burst of fire in his face. The guard flinched and raised one arm to shield himself. Then Skellig was on him, her hands reaching for the boy’s sword and pulling it free in one smooth motion. Without missing a beat, Skellig brought the hilt up to connect with the Watcher’s head, and he dropped to the ground.

But he wasn’t the only guard. By now, Jak was running to join Skellig, just as two more Watchers entered, a man and a woman. Jak launched herself at the latter, letting flames spew out of her hands and counting on her Strength to aid her in combat. The Watcher raised her spear against her, but she batted it aside with a Strength-enhanced swat that threw the woman off balance. Then she knocked the Watcher alongside the head and witnessed her drop to the floor as well. Neither Watcher had even had a chance to use their brands yet.

Skellig was already fighting the third Watcher, and holding her own for now. Instead of aid her, Jak ran for the door, looking out to see if there had been any others. Just as she looked down the darkened corridor, she saw a figure slip around the corner. Broken Brands, if word got out that they were free, they were all finished.

Jak ran for all she was worth, allowing her Strength to close the distance in leaps and bounds. She rounded the corner and saw the Watcher ahead of her. If only she had Telekinesis, she could just pluck him up and stop him from moving. She *would* figure that one out eventually. But now was not the time.

She doubled her pace, grateful that these dungeons seemed to be rather secluded, but that wouldn’t hold for long. The Watcher began climbing a set of stairs ahead of her. If he managed to get up to the higher levels, he’d call out for help and that would ruin everything.

With one last heave she flung herself forward, her superhuman strength carrying her farther than a normal human could possibly jump. She landed squarely in the Watcher’s back.

The man fell to the floor in a graceful roll, spinning as he did so to face Jak. She recognized the fluidity in his movements without having to look down at his brand arm. This man had Grace. Well, she just happened to have trained for months with a Watcher possessing Grace.

He lunged at her with a sword in one hand and a dagger in the other. When she dogged the first, he immediately swung the other around in its wake.

Jak summoned a ribbon of fire and shot it at the man, who easily sidestepped the assault. But Jak had anticipated his movements, launching herself to the side where he had moved. She had no weapon but her own brands, but those would have to be enough.

More flames shot from her hands and covered the young Watcher. In the chaos he didn't lift his sword in time as Jak hurled herself at him. A few quick jabs to the gut and a blow to the head, and he was down.

Jak stood, panting. Relics, but it felt good to have her powers back again. She'd forgotten how they made her feel. How had she even lived without these abilities?

With one last glance to make sure no one had seen what happened, she picked up the Watcher, slung him over her shoulder with ease and jogged back to the dungeons.

Skellig was waiting for her, having already dealt with the last guard. "Thank the ancestors. I thought we were finished when that one ran away."

"Yes, but we have to move quickly. There will be others coming to check on them soon."

"We still have to decide what to do next." Yewin emerged from the door to the cells, followed by Girwirt, Noralim, and the rest. "Do we follow Jak's plan?"

Jak looked to Girwirt, as did many of the others. She suspected that if he went along with her plan, the rest would follow suit, particularly after Noralim and Yewin had already pledged their support.

Girwirt squirmed at the number of eyes on him. "What? I already told you I don't like it. I don't want to try anything with a high likelihood of death."

"But it's like you said, Girwirt," Jak offered. "We can't hide, we can't fight, and we can't escape. Eventually Cain will realize we're gone and he'll come for us. It doesn't matter where we are, he'll find us eventually. And how long do you think you'll live then?"

Girwirt looked from Yewin, to Jak, to Noralim, and back at Jak again. His shoulders slumped and he let his head fall back, staring at the ceiling. "AH! Fine! But if we get through all of this you're going to owe me the biggest pot of mushrooms you've ever set eyes on!" He brandished a finger at Jak.

"Deal," Jak said, smiling. They had a plan! It was a plan with a lot of unknowns, but Jak was certain of one thing. Their only hope lay with the Pillar of Eternity. Even though she didn't know exactly what it did, she knew it wanted to be free, and that it must be powerful if Cain wanted it. And besides, she could still feel it calling to her.

Perhaps it had been her destiny all along to retrieve the Relic.

When she had first arrived in the mountain, she had been determined to do everything herself. To free the Fae, take the Relic, and escape all on her own. Now she realized how stupid that had been. She couldn't expect to fight the shadow alone. She needed help. She needed a team.

Turning to Noralim, she asked, "Do you know a better way to get to Dragon Lake?"

Noralim nodded. "It's a bit roundabout, but we can get there. There are several tunnels leading from the city to that area. We'll come close to the forges though, so we could run into some of the soldiers there."

"We can deal with a few." Skellig offered. "I'm more worried about what happens once we arrive at the lake."

Jak spoke up. "From what I've seen, few ever go there except when Cain attempts the link, and he wasn't planning to do that for a few more hours at least. But I agree, we should be prepared for anything."

"The passage I know of will take us to another side of Dragon Lake," said Noralim. "Opposite where the Watchers usually congregate."

"Great. I suggest we figure the rest out on the way," said Jak.

Skellig nodded in agreement, as did several of the others. They had no belongings to carry with them, so they stowed the unconscious Watchers inside the cells so they wouldn't escape, and set off down a side passage that Noralim indicated, in the opposite direction of where Jak had chased down the escaping guard.

Jak found herself walking alongside Girwirt. After a few minutes, she said. "You know, something's bothering me, Girwirt. Those dungeons, if it weren't for the Void brands, you and the other gnomes could have escaped easily. And you didn't have Void brands before. So why did you build dungeons like that? How do you keep the troublemakers of your society from just getting loose?"

Girwirt looked at her like she had missed the obvious. "Those weren't built for us. We'd never imprison one of ours."

"But what of criminals?"

"Criminals?" Girwirt sounded the word out carefully, like he had never heard it before.

"Yeah, you know. People that steal, kill, or anything like that."

"We've never had a need." Girwirt shrugged. "We built those dungeons for you giants."

"Really? But I thought you didn't leave the mountain before now."

"We didn't, but that hasn't stopped some of you from poking your noses where they don't belong."

"Though, of course, imprisonment like that would only work as long as the prisoner didn't have a brand like Flamedancing, Strength,

or Telekinesis.”

Girwirt looked back at the road in front of him, picking up his pace a bit. “Yeah, well. Perhaps we didn’t know as much about you giants as we thought. Flaming magic.”

Jak smiled but walked in silence alongside Girwirt for a while. The tunnels they passed through were all completely unlit by torches or any other means, but Yewin gave off enough light for them to see, even though Jak could tell he was trying to keep as much light from escaping his body as he could. So far, they hadn’t run into any other Watchers, and Jak wasn’t surprised. There were tunnels leading everywhere here, and she was shocked that Noralim seemed to know his way through all of them, never missing a beat as they approached a new junction or fork in the road.

What bothered her more was that she caught a few of the others looking at her...differently now. Like they had never seen her properly before. They almost appeared to look up to her, apart from the literal sense.

She could only hope that their trust was well placed. Because if her plan did not work, they would all die.

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he buzzing in Jak's head grew louder and more insistent. That was the first clue that they were getting close. The second came when they rounded a corner and Jak saw the familiar warm glow ahead of them. Noralim put out a hand to stop everyone.

"We should check to make sure none of them are patrolling the area," he said.

Skellig nodded. "I'll go."

She passed Noralim and creped ahead, disappearing around the corner.

They all waited, and Jak had to keep her foot from tapping the ground.

When Skellig returned she was standing straight. "I can't see anyone yet. But I heard sound in the direction of the forges. There are still people there, and it won't be long before one of them brings a cart of finished armor this way, so we'll need to be quick."

Jak nodded and began walking again, the rest of the party following behind her.

The tunnel soon opened to the large cavern that housed Dragon Lake. It sprawled in front of her, and she could see the small outcropping to her left where Cain had forced her to link. She moved around to the right, aiming for the opposite side. The rock grew rougher as they left the more travelled paths. Large chunks of rock lay from what felt like ages ago when part of the ceiling had collapsed, resulting in the closure of their only escape route further down.

Finally, when she felt sufficiently removed from the paths that led from the fiery lake to the forges, she turned and faced Skellig and the Fae.

"I can feel it, just there." She pointed to a spot near the center of the lake. "I won't force anyone to link who isn't willing. We are still taking a risk here, even though I think having Yewin and all of you together may help. You're welcome to step back if you don't want to take that risk."

She glanced at Girwirt when she said this, and while the gnome

looked troubled as always, he stood his ground. Looking at the others, she returned the smile that Noralim flashed at her. Not a one moved.

“Thank you,” she said, and turned to face the lake.

Jak took a deep breath, the hum of the Pillar of Eternity still loud in her mind. She could do this. She would not let these Fae die.

Yewin walked up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” Jak said, surprised at how strong her voice sounded. “And Yewin, if this doesn’t work...”

“It will work, Jak. Trust me. Killing us is not your truth.”

The remaining Fae gathered around Jak, some placing their hands on her shoulders and arms, others touching Yewin. Noralim and Girwirt joined in, becoming part of a weave of arms and hands that spread from her and the Bright Fae. Soon, all of them were connected to her in one way or another. Only Skellig stood apart, observing with her sword at the ready should the Watchers discover what they were doing.

“Now,” Yewin said softly.

And light exploded all around Jak.

This was more than any previous link. That awareness she had felt before was nothing compared to this. Not only could she feel the Earth all around them, but she could see it as if looking down from above. She could see the sun shining like pure fire hundreds of thousands of miles away. She could feel other celestial bodies hanging in the emptiness around that. Truth about the nature of her surroundings flooded her mind, a combination of the Earthly awareness from the gnomes and the dwarves, but also the light and truth coming from Yewin. This was a link stronger than any she had ever experienced.

Waiting for her, was the Pillar of Eternity. It sat in the middle of the lake, regarding her. *I knew you would come again, eventually.*

*I have to take you away, Jak said in her mind. We need your help.*

*Come to me, the Relic called.*

Jak rose to her feet, still feeling the hands on her shoulders and arms. Yet she knew in that moment that their physical touch was unnecessary. She took a step forward. Hands clutched at her shoulders, Yewin was trying to hold her back. Jak raised one hand to her shoulder and rested it on his. A sign of permission, that she knew what she was doing. The link was all in their minds, she could do this.

Hands released her as she took another step forward. The link remained, and it would until she either released it, or the energy of her companions drained away completely. Something all too possible. She would need to be quick.

On her next step her foot sank into the lake of lava. She felt nothing, only a soft tingling sensation. It appeared what Girwirt said

was true. The link did grant her some of his abilities. She continued to walk forward, closing the distance between her and the Relic. The lava rose to her waist, then her chest, not touching her. Not even burning the clothes off her back. A barrier of thought lay between her and the angry liquid stone.

Soon, the lava covered her head, and she stared into nothing but bright yellow-red fire.

*I am here.* She reached out both hands, searching for the Relic she knew existed just ahead of her.

For a moment, nothing happened, and she felt panic begin to boil up in her stomach.

Then something touched her fingers and she clamped her hands down on something tangible. It had the form of a staff, and Jak could feel the rough surface pulse with life beneath her palms.

The moment her hand touched the staff, light exploded in front of her eyes. Power flooded through her body and she would have collapsed to her knees had she not been swimming in thick molten rock. Surely she had never held something so powerful, so majestic. This was an honor she did not deserve.

Something coalesced in the light in front of her. A shape, an image. She squinted, trying to make sense of the figure. The light that surrounded her was different now, brighter. Was she even in the lava anymore?

As the image grew closer, she began to make out more. It was the figure of a man, dressed in loose animal skins and sporting wavy blonde hair. She recoiled, thinking it was Cain, but she quickly realized that it was not the same man, though the resemblance was uncanny.

“Hello, Jak,” the man said, drawing even with her.

“You...know my name?” she asked, frowning at him.

He smiled. “The Pillar of Eternity does.”

“Where am I?” she asked, glancing around her. She could see nothing but whiteness in every direction.

“You are where you were. I am merely a vision. The Pillar has granted you an opportunity to speak with me, but our time is short. If you do not return soon, your friends will die.”

Jak looked back at him. “Who are you?”

He smiled at her. “My name is Adam. I am your ancestor.” Jak felt her jaw grow slack, and the man chuckled. “Yes, I see you’ve heard of me.”

“You are...*the* Adam?” was all she could ask.

“I am,” he said. “But as I said, our time together is short. I must impress upon you the important nature of the staff you hold in your hands.”

That was the first time Jak realized she could see what she held. It was a rod made of a peculiar black metal, stretching up about two feet above her head, larger at the top. Odd silver and gold markings covered it on all sides, a collection of straight and angled lines connecting small circles and squares. The entire rod was covered with them.

“That is a Pillar of Eternity,” Adam continued. “I made it myself, many years ago, and it holds great power. I buried it here, charging those of my children to guard it with their lives. You must not let it fall into the hands of the enemy.”

“Yes, someone wants it, he’s done everything he can to get it. He’s killed many.”

Adam took a deep breath. “That man was my son.”

Suddenly everything seemed to make sense to Jak. That was why the two looked so similar. Cain was the son of Adam. He had told her this when they first met by the Dragon Lake, but she hadn’t thought anything of it since.

“After I left my people and came to this planet, my wife gave birth to him not far from here.” Adam continued. “As he grew I taught him everything I knew about magic and science. But it soon became apparent to me that he would not use his knowledge for good. He murdered his brother and fled from me. My wife and I had many children after that, but we never heard of Cain again for many years. By then, I was old and worn, but I learned that he had used my teachings to twist himself into a monstrosity, a shell of what he once was. In that way he gained a measure of long life, but it was a miserable one. And so I hid our greatest treasures, so he could never get his hands on them.”

“The Pillars of Eternity.” Jak said.

Adam nodded. “I knew they would be needed again, so I made sure that someone worthy could obtain them. The Relic knows you, Jak. It chose you. Use it well.”

He began to turn away from Jak, and she took several steps forward. “But wait, what does it do?”

Adam smiled warmly at her. “It is our past. It is our present. It is our future. It is the reason you and I are able to speak, and it will reveal more of itself in time, if not to you, than to others who seek it.”

“I don’t understand.” Jak took another eager step towards the man, continuing to grasp the Relic in both hands.

“You will not need to. Now go, your friends will not last long.”

And in a rush, the white light faded and Jak was left in the yellow-red lava. The rod was still in her hands, and she could still feel its power. There was something else in the lava as well, something she could feel deeper in the lake. Something alive and sleeping. Mentally,

she reached out to it, trying to discover what it was. And its mind awoke in that instant. It focused on Jak, it became aware of her.

Jak recoiled and realized in that moment that she had to return and break the link. Whatever lay deep within the mountain would have to wait.

She turned and dashed as fast as she could in the direction she had come. Her head surfaced, then her shoulders, and finally the rest of her emerged from the lava, the hot liquid sliding off of her without a trace. Yewin, Girwirt, and the others were waiting for her. As soon as Jak felt solid earth beneath her feet, she mentally released the link. With a gasp of relief, Yewin collapsed and the glowing outline that surrounded each of them faded.

Some of the Fae fell backwards as if exhausted. Some were pale. Yewin's natural light was far from its usual strong glow. But they were all alive.

They stared at her. No, they stared at what she held in her hand. Jak followed their gazes.

In her grasp lay the Pillar of Eternity, point down in the volcanic rock. Its surface gleamed in the warm light, and Jak could feel the power radiating off of it. That buzz in her mind was gone. It no longer called to her, because they were finally united.

“Are you okay?” she asked the others. One by one, they nodded, though Girwirt looked like he wanted to wring her neck.

“I think we will recover.” said Yewin. He was holding himself steady against a stone pillar, looking winded but not in any serious condition.

“I’m sorry to put you through that,” Jak said, grimacing as she saw some of the dwarves and gnomes on the ground, panting. “But it worked! We got the Relic. An actual Pillar of Eternity.” She brandished the staff in front of her.

Noralim was on his knees, and quite possibly not due to exhaustion. “We’ve heard our mother’s stories speak of this thing for generations. I never thought in a million years that I would lay my eyes upon it.”

“Yeah, but what does it do?” Girwirt said folding his arms. He still didn’t look pleased that Jak had nearly drained the life from him. “The stories never said much on that point.”

“I don’t rightly know,” said Jak, glancing back down at the polished black staff in her hand. Adam hadn’t really been clear on that front. Relics, she had spoken to *the* Adam. Whatever this staff did, it must be important.

“Well...” Girwirt looked at her with his arms out to either side, expectantly. “What are you waiting for? Try it out.”

“Eh...” Jak looked around at the group of Fae. All of them had

their eyes locked on her, waiting to see what she would do with the Relic. Even Skellig had unfolded her arms and stepped forward to see better.

The problem was, Jak had no idea how it was supposed to work. She grasped the polished metal in both hands, taking note of the intricate lines that crisscrossed all over the surface of the thing. Perhaps this was some kind of elaborate brand? Maybe if she activated her own magic it would respond.

She gave it a shot, activating her Gifter brand, and willing the staff to do...whatever it was that it did.

Nothing happened.

She tried again, this time carefully running through the mental disciplines needed to activate brands. Still nothing. She tried using a bit of Flamedancing magic on it, after all the staff had lived in a pool of lava for who knew how long. Perhaps the heat had something to do with it. But even that didn't work.

The Fae were growing restless. "Let me try!" said Girwirt, pushing forward. Others surrounded Jak, putting out their hands and reaching to take the Pillar of Eternity from her. Instinctively she raised it high above her head where the diminutive gnomes and dwarves could not touch it.

"Hold on!" she said. "We just got this thing, it will probably take some study to figure out how to use it."

Suddenly the ground underneath them rumbled, a deep rumble that made everything, even the stone pillars tremble. Jak brought the staff back down to keep her balance. The rest had temporarily lost interest in the Relic as they looked around to see what had happened.

"That..." Girwirt said, "that has never happened before."

Jak turned to him and the rest of the Fae. "You mean you've never felt a tremor before?" Jak was more or less used to them, growing up close to the mountains, though none had been large enough to cause any serious damage in Riverbrook. It struck her as odd that these Fae, who actually lived in a mountain, had never felt them before.

"Tremors? You're saying the ground moves like that where you giants come from?"

"Yes, they're perfectly normal."

Noralim spoke up, a hint of doubt in his normally cheery persona. "I can confirm Girwirt's words. We have never felt such a...tremor, as you called it."

Another tremor hit, slightly larger than before. Fae grasped at whatever they could find for balance, sometimes each other. It still wasn't that much of a tremor, but even Skellig put her hands out to steady herself.

This didn't have anything to do with the fact that she'd taken the

Pillar of Eternity, did it? That thought troubled Jak. What else might change now that the Relic was gone from its former resting place? She looked behind her at Dragon Lake. Could that mind she had felt just before breaking the link be the cause? She couldn't feel it now, without the link. But she had awoken something far beneath them, and she had a feeling it wouldn't result in something good.

"I think we might want to get out of here," she said. "It's time to leave the mountain."

"Are you saying that Relic can help us escape?" said Skellig.

"No, but I think the Watchers might have more on their minds soon. We should go to the camps and get as many of the Fae out as we can."

Skellig nodded. "I suppose if we have any chance of succeeding we'll need their help. But what about Cain. If he shows up..."

"I know." Jak said, looking back down at the Relic. If he showed up, there would be nothing keeping him from just taking the Pillar from her hands. Unless she could find a way to use the object against him.

She tried again to will the staff to reveal its secrets, but it remained cold and inert in her hands. It had spoken to her before. Why didn't it now?

"Let's go," she said, taking a few steps back the way they had come. "One problem at a time. We'll have to take out the Watchers that guard the Fae," she glanced at Skellig. "Do you think we can manage it?"

Skellig nodded. "I think if we take them by surprise we'll stand a chance."

That was enough for Jak. She began marching back alongside the Dragon Lake. If their absence had not been noticed by now, it soon would be. So they had to do what they could to get everyone out while they still had the element of surprise.

A third tremor shook the cavern, this one larger than the previous two. Something was definitely happening underneath them, and Jak was sure it had something to do with the fact that the Pillar of Eternity was gone. If she was right, they may only have a matter of minutes to rescue the Fae.

# T

he tremors increased in duration and frequency as they moved on. Bits of rock fell from the ceiling and peppered them as they went. Sometimes Jak thought she could hear some kind of sound associated with the tremors. Like the roar of a large animal. She hoped she was hearing things in the low rumble of the tremors themselves.

Regardless, they picked up their pace, moving through the long tunnels as fast as they could. They found several Watchers on the way, but most were already running in the opposite direction, towards the Fae city. A few glanced at them but few took any notice as they ran. No doubt they feared collapsing tunnels. Well, it was nice to have that as a distraction at least, even though Jak agreed that they were in increasing danger. They needed to leave. Soon.

They arrived at the forges, where only a few Watchers remained to watch the Fae working there. There were fewer than Jak expected. Likely the others had already left for the Fae city.

Jak and Skellig led the charge to take out the first of the soldiers, who went down easily as they were probably distracted by the tremors.

The rest were wise enough to see they were hugely outnumbered and dropped their weapons, holding their hands in surrender. Jak glanced at each of them in turn, and found she recognized Nolm among them.

“Nolm. Can you and the others get these men out?” she indicated the unconscious Watchers on the ground.

Nolm looked from them to her, to the Fae surrounding her. He swallowed. “You’re not going to kill us?”

“What? No. Of course not. But I think you may be in danger if you stay. Can you do it?”

“I think so,” said Nolm, putting his arms down.

“Then I suggest you do it, now.” Jak put emphasis in her words. Another tremor encouraged them further, and the Watchers rushed to pick up their fallen comrades and carry them out of the forges. The remaining Fae in the room looked at Jak like she was some kind of

hero. Well, perhaps she was. She hadn't wanted it, and she had failed more times than not, but perhaps there was something to the prophecies she'd read in Seph's Book of Illadar. It had been right so far.

Still carrying the Pillar of Eternity in her hands, she addressed the Fae. "We have to hurry, I think the mountain might come down around us."

They didn't need to be told twice. They scrambled away from their work stations and began filing out the cavern entrance, also heading in the direction of the city.

Jak turned to face Skellig and the others. "I think we'll need to split up. Most should accompany everyone here to the exit, while someone goes to the caves where the rest of the Fae are kept."

Skellig nodded. "I agree."

"I'll go for the others," Jak said, taking a step as if to pass Skellig.

A hand stopped her. "No," said Skellig, putting her hands on Jak's shoulders. "Those Fae are deeper in the mountain. If the ground shakes further, it could all come crashing down around us. That means that the least expendable of us must get out first. And that means you."

"But..."

"No buts. If you were to become trapped down there with the Pillar of Eternity, we wouldn't have a chance. If you can escape, then that will be something."

Skellig gripped her shoulders and stared Jak squarely in the eyes, as if asking if Jak understood. She hated having to send Skellig on a risky venture. But someone had to do it. And as much as Jak hated to admit it, Skellig was right.

"What if I run into Cain?" said Jak. "I don't think I can hold him off."

"You'll just have to cross that bridge when you come to it," said Skellig. She took a few steps back and began to turn around. "Trust your instincts." Then turning to Yewin she added, "I will need light."

Yewin nodded. "Happy to be of service." He was looking a lot better already.

Skellig's advice didn't really make Jak feel any better. Yet she let the former Watcher go with Yewin down into the caves below. Skellig would know the way, having escorted Jak several times back when she had been a slave.

That left Jak with Girwirt, Noralim, and the rest of the Fae. "Come on," said Jak, and she began running out of the cavern containing the forges, and back towards Dragon Lake and the Fae city beyond. The others followed her without question this time, even Girwirt. Apparently they were growing to trust in her leadership more. Jak

wasn't sure if she was comfortable with that, or if...

Pain spiked into her head, and she stopped in her tracks, bending over and clutching her temples with her free hand. They weren't far from Dragon Lake, and they had to find cover soon or they would be exposed, but in that moment, Jak couldn't even think about that.

Noralim came up beside her. "What's the matter?"

Jak felt a wave of fury pass through her. The emotion wasn't her own. She gripped the Pillar of Eternity for support. In that exact moment, something flashed before her eyes. She saw the Fae surrounding her, all of them dead and bleeding on the ground. No, they were slaves again. No, they were crushed beneath rubble caused by the sudden tremors. Cain had killed them. No, she had killed them. No, something else, a force buried deep within this mountain had killed them. Jak groaned as more images flashed through her vision, almost all of them horrifying and deadly, though not all.

Instinctively she knew what she was seeing, though she couldn't fathom how the visions were possible. Somehow she was seeing possible glimpses of the future. She looked back at the gleaming black rod in her hand. Was this the power it held? How could she possibly make sense of all that knowledge that had just poured into her brain. Though there was one thing that remained constant in almost every flash of the future. A warning.

"He's coming," she panted for air as the headache subsided and looked towards Dragon Lake. Was the lava hotter than before? The warm glow was now brighter, filling nearly the entire cavern with light.

Noralim did not need to be told who "he" was. "Come on, everyone," he waved the other Fae forward. We need to find another way to the city."

"You go ahead and take them, Noralim," said Jak. "I'm going to stay."

"But, you just said."

"It's okay, Noralim. I...don't know how to explain it, but I think this is something I must do to save you."

Something in those mysterious flashes of the future hinted at possibilities. They all suggested one thing. If she fled with the Fae, they would die, and she would die with them, leaving the Pillar of Eternity in the hands of the world's greatest threat. But if she was accurately making sense of what she had just seen, her only hope lay in confronting Cain. Here, at Dragon Lake. To give her team a chance to escape. That was her part.

She turned to face the glowing lake. Yes, it definitely looked brighter now, and Jak thought she saw something like large bubbles form in the center, disrupting the previously calm surface of the

molten lake. The ripples those bubbles created carried to the edges, where small flecks of lava peppered the hard rock beyond.

That all-too familiar sensation of dread filled her stomach. Cain was on his way, and he was furious. She would meet him here, and either she would die, or she would not. Jak only wished she knew which was more likely.

# P

ower filled the large cavern as a horrifying presence entered.

Darkness closed in on Jak. She couldn't quite tell if this was a form that Cain took, or if it was just an environmental side effect of his raw power. Regardless, she soon found herself surrounded by it. Taking a deep breath, she held her ground.

"I SHOULD HAVE KILLED YOU AGES AGO!" said a voice from the darkness.

"Perhaps you should have," said Jak, sounding more confident than she felt.

The darkness coalesced until Jak could see more of her surroundings. It gathered together until she saw the form of a man. General Doran. Cain.

"Still, I suppose you have saved me a lot of trouble in retrieving the Pillar for me," Cain said, eying the staff in Jak's hand. "So I will give you one last chance. Join me. With that Relic in our possession, we could rule the entire planet. You have no idea the breadth of what's out there, the people just waiting for someone to give them prosperity, to give them an easy life. There are whole continents of unexplored territory, and wonders beyond anything you could possibly imagine. We could provide stability for all."

"At what cost?" Jak asked. "The death of thousands? Of millions?"

"What are a few deaths when it results in a more prosperous life for billions? We'd give them a life they would never have known otherwise. With the other Pillars of Eternity in our possession, we could even take them beyond the stars, to worlds above."

Jak blinked, for the first time utterly surprised. What Cain said resonated with her. She had seen something similar in her links with Yewin. There were other worlds out there. And Cain's words came very close to something Gabriel had told her once. According to the scholar, the Pillars of Eternity were some kind of "worldbringers". She did not know what that meant, but perhaps Cain did.

"What do you mean?" said Jak. She needed to keep Cain talking. The longer she could occupy him, the better the chances that the rest

of the Fae could get away. Yet Dragon Lake continued to bubble off to one side, causing Jak to glance nervously in that direction.

Cain flashed a wicked smile at her, mistaking her interest in what he knew of the Pillars of Eternity for interest in his proposal. “When combined, all three Pillars of Eternity have nearly unlimited power. Power first discovered by my father, and embodied in these Relics. Power of time, space, and creation itself. With it, we could explore the heavens, even create our own. We’d have the respect, not only from everyone on this world, but in those beyond. Gods, ruling over worlds of our own creation.”

*Worldbringers.* That must be what the Pillars did. Suddenly it all made sense to her. Why Cain was the way he was. Why he hated the Fae and disregarded human life. He wanted...

“I met your father,” she said, offhand as if it was a small thing.

That shut him up fast. His face fell and his brows furrowed. “What did you say?”

“I said, I met your father. When I took this.” She indicated the Pillar of Eternity. “Something about it allowed me to communicate with him in the past.”

“It imprints on those who possess it. What you saw was nothing more than a weak memory,” Cain said.

“He looked like you,” Jak said, ignoring Cain’s comment.

“He is nothing like me.” Cain’s face darkened, and the air seemed to shimmer all around him. “I have become far more powerful than he even dreamed of. I have become immortal.”

“He pities you, but I don’t think he’s angry. He seemed more...sad.”

Cain’s eyes flashed that cold blue that she’d seen before. Perhaps by coincidence, another tremor rumbled through the cavern, causing chunks of rock to fall around her and into Dragon Lake. The surface of the lake seemed to shimmer as well, an odd swelling in the center that came and went.

“He never respected me,” Cain said, ignoring the tumult around him. “He always loved my brother more than me. His firstborn! I, who was in my mother’s womb before he even set foot on this planet. He saw me as the reminder of all he had lost.”

“That doesn’t sound right at all,” Jak said, continuing to keep her voice calm and serene, as if she wasn’t aware of how dangerous her situation was. “I got the sense that he loved you, and that he wished no ill will on you.”

“Give me the Pillar,” said Cain, his voice a dangerous growl. Jak stilled. It seemed he was past discussion now. Her attempt to keep him talking had come to an end. Perhaps if...

“I’m still considering your offer,” she lied. “What exactly would these worlds entail?”

But Cain was having none of it. “I see what you’re doing. The mountain is closing in. The magic holding it in place is gone, removed when you took the Pillar of Eternity. You’re trying to keep me here, to ensure that I die in the rubble. Noble of you, but ultimately fruitless.”

He had it almost right. In truth she wanted to keep him here long enough to give the others an escape. It would be a nice bonus if the mountain came crashing down around Cain and trapped him here. Jak very much wanted to stay alive, though she would make that sacrifice if it meant keeping Cain here.

There was no point to keeping up the facade anymore. She spread her arms wide. “You got me. And it was working too. As powerful as you are, you’re still susceptible to the influence of basic human pride.”

Cain’s eyes flashed and Jak felt a strange sensation, a mixture of fear and satisfaction. She tightened her grip on the Pillar of Eternity. Whatever happened, she could not let him have it. But how could she fight someone so powerful when he had easily dominated her before?

As if sensing her thoughts, he took a step forward and said, “You know you can’t fight me. Give me the staff.”

Jak took a step backward as Cain advanced on her. But she couldn’t go far, with Dragon Lake blocking off her escape from behind.

She stared down at the polished metal in her hands. *Come on, work! I need help here. Give me something besides visions of the future. That can’t be all you do.* Perhaps the Pillar only worked when used with the other Pillars? Or maybe its only use was to create worlds like Cain said.

Despite her desperate situation, the Pillar remained inert. Cain continued to step forward, the darkness seeming to grow around him as he walked. “You realize I can just take what I want,” he said. “There is nothing you can do to stop me.”

Suddenly an idea occurred to Jak. She had backed up as far as she could go, feeling the scorching heat of the lava behind her. Reaching one arm out, grasping the Pillar of Eternity, she held it over the surface of the fiery lake.

Cain stopped walking towards her. “Don’t be a fool.”

“The Pillar requires you to work with others to possess it. I’m guessing if I throw it back in, you’ll have the same difficulty in laying your hands on it as before.”

What was she doing? She had just found the Pillar and now she was going to throw it back? Waste all that effort?

“You know I will possess it eventually.” Cain said, folding his arms and looking unimpressed. “It’s only a matter of time, if I have to round up all the puny Fae in the entire kingdom.”

Of course, he was right. That was why Jak had retrieved the staff

in the first place. She knew that he would find a way to obtain it, and she guessed that she could do more good if she got it first. Of course, that was before she had tried to use it several times. Right now, it wasn't proving to be of any help.

"You may be right, but at least it will hold you back a while longer. And perhaps this mountain will come back down around it, making it even harder. Either way, I will have granted the others a fighting chance."

Cain calmly regarded her as Jak kept the staff poised over the surface of the lava, ready to throw it in at a moment's notice.

Meanwhile, the mountain trembled and cracked around them.

“Y

ou’re a tenacious one, I’ll give you that,” Cain said. “But

your threat ultimately has no substance. I have waited eons for this time, when the most powerful of my father’s Relics reactivated across the land. I can wait as long as it takes. You, on the other hand have no time left, and neither do your friends.” He took one step back, relaxing his posture. “So go ahead, throw it in. Then I will kill you, and everyone you’ve ever...argh!”

Cain’s sentence cut off as he doubled over in pain, a massive short sword protruding from his gut. Jak stood frozen, her arm still poised over the lake of lava, eyes wide in shock.

Gripping the dagger, standing behind Cain, was Skellig, brandishing Jak’s spear. She had snuck up so quietly in the darkness that even Jak hadn’t seen her approach. Now she twisted the sword in one hand, let go, and raised her spear.

Her hands barely left the sword before she was hurled backward by an overwhelming force. Skellig slammed into the rocks on the nearest side of the cavern, the spear clattering to the ground.

“Impressive,” said Cain, pulling the dagger out of his side. Instantly, the wound knit itself together and left nothing but a slight smear of blood. Broken Brands, he was powerful. It would take a conventional Healing brand hours to mend a wound like that. Could anything harm this man?

“Go, Jak!” Skellig called to her. “Run!”

Jak did not need to be told twice. She ran past Cain, in the direction of the Fae city. But without warning an invisible force lifted her off her feet, and she stopped dead in midair.

“You’re not getting away so easily,” said Cain, holding both of them aloft now.

Jak struggled against the Telekinetic bond. Her Strength brand gave her a fighting chance against Telekinesis, but try as she might, she couldn’t break the hold. Cain was simply too strong. Skellig also looked like she was struggling, but to no effect.

Then Jak saw something. The surface of Dragon Lake was almost

boiling now, bits of lava splattering everywhere. If they weren't careful some of those bits might hit them. But a tendril of the molten rock had risen out of the lake and was slowly directing itself at Cain. Jak strained her head to get a look at Skellig. The former Watcher was struggling to break Cain's grip, but she also had an intense look of concentration on her face. The woman was using her Flamedancer brand to direct the lava at Cain.

The telekinetic grip grew tighter, and Jak gasped for air. Skellig too squirmed as Cain squeezed her with his mind. A sickening crack, accompanied by a scream, echoed through the chamber as one of Skellig's bones broke. The tendril of molten rock wavered.

Jak activated her own Flamedancer brand, and reached out to the fiery lava. With her help, the lava sped towards Cain, who still stood unaware of what they were doing. The lava slammed into him, coating his entire body.

Immediately Jak felt the hold on her body loosen and she felt to the ground, barely keeping her grip on the Pillar of Eternity in the process. Skellig also fell to the ground and clutched at her arm, which must have been what broke under Cain's grip.

Patches of Cain's clothes were on fire, but the man himself, if he could be called a man, was untouched. Their little stunt had only distracted him. Furious, he rounded on Skellig, who was scrambling to pick up her weapon and join Jak. Together they ran.

"You only prolong the inevitable," said Cain. He raised a hand and once again both Skellig and Jak were stopped in their tracks. "I have faced foes ten times your strength, and even then I..."

He cut off suddenly. Jak, still in Cain's mental grip, twisted to try and see what had distracted him. Her mouth went slack.

A huge shape was rising out of Dragon Lake, bits of glowing lava flowing off its form. It was the color of the molten liquid, and its back shifted and undulated. It staggered closer to where the lava met stone, and Jak could make out bright, fiery eyes in a massive head filled with sharp pointed teeth the size of her head. It stood on four legs and two massive wings began to spread on its back, taking in its newfound space in the large cavern.

Skellig's mouth was open, and Jak's heart raced. "Dragon Lake," she said, almost without realizing that she spoke the words aloud. The name had been literal, for what stood before her could only be one of those mysterious creatures.

The dragon's eyes bathed the cavern in a new kind of warm light, until they finally fixed on Cain. The man was staring at the creature, as surprised and entranced by the dragon as Jak and Skellig. They considered one another, one mighty monster facing another, measuring the threat they faced.

Then, with a snap of its massive jaws, the creature lunged at Cain.

Instantly, Jak and Skellig found control of their limbs once again. Cain threw up some kind of shield which protected him from the dragon's initial onslaught. But the beast threw himself at Cain again, and again. Cain's feet dragged on the ground as his shield took the full force of the attack.

"We have to go!" said Skellig.

Jak said nothing but ran as fast as she could towards the tunnel that would lead them to the Fae city and the exit beyond. Skellig was clutching at her arm, but managed to keep pace beside her.

They stumbled as one of the strongest tremors yet shook the cavern. Stone fell from the ceiling and Jak threw up her hands to protect herself. She spared one last glance behind her to see Cain dancing around the dragon, doing his best to avoid its huge jaws and spiked tail. He threw a variety of enchantments at the beast, most of which simply bounced off its glistening scales. That natural armor must be amazingly strong to survive being inside a lake of molten lava for so many years. Had Jak been the one to awaken it when she took the Pillar of Eternity?

It was then she noticed that the level of the Dragon Lake had risen. It now covered the small outcropping where they had been standing mere seconds before. And it was continuing to climb.

"Run faster!" she yelled and turned all her focus to putting one leg in front of the other as fast as she possibly could. This whole place was going to go up in flames soon.

Skellig obeyed, though she was panting and wincing in pain, clutching her arm as she ran.

They emerged into the huge cavern that held the massive city built by the dwarves and gnomes. Jak's eyes immediately caught sight of a group of Fae, led by Yewin, Noralim, and Girwirt. They had made it. Jak saw no sign of the Watchers. Most of them had probably left as soon as the tremors started getting worse, leaving the Fae to die.

"Move!" Jak screamed at them, not daring to slow down. "The lake is rising, it'll be here soon."

Thankfully, none of them questioned her, though some, like Girwirt, looked confused and took some time to get moving. By then, Jak was already past them, sprinting ahead down a main road towards a light source that could only be the exit out of the mountain.

An explosion rocked through the cavern, the shockwave causing Jak to tumble and fall. She picked herself up and looked at the source of the explosion. The dragon had emerged from the small tunnel. He must have smashed his way through it, how else could he have made it through such a small hole. Cain was there as well, and they continued their fight, oblivious to Jak or the Fae. Behind them glowed

faint traces of the lava. And then Jak saw it, bright liquid rock spewing through the tunnel, moving the rubble aside as it went. It flowed around Cain and the dragon, who seemed completely oblivious to its effects. Relics, he was so powerful.

“Go, go, go!” Jak shouted at the others. That molten lava would reach them quickly. It spewed into the chamber even faster than Jak anticipated. Removing the Pillar from the lake had probably caused the lava to rise as well. What had been a dormant volcanic mountain, had just become fully active in a matter of hours.

They were close to the entrance and Jak still couldn’t see any Watchers nearby. She could still hear the roar of the dragon behind them, and she thought she could feel the increasing heat from the approaching lava. But she didn’t look around. She kept running.

She blinked her eyes to the increasing brightness. She hadn’t seen any direct sunlight in days, probably weeks now. But upon rounding a corner she saw the entrance, pure sunlight streaming through it.

Despite herself, Jak had to stop and shield her eyes. It was so bright. She felt actual pain at seeing it after so long. The entrance was not all that large by most standards. It stood just higher than Jak herself, and wasn’t any wider than it was tall. Apparently the short-statured dwarves and gnomes hadn’t seen a need to build anything larger.

The Fae caught up with her, their smaller legs moving faster than Jak would have expected. Skellig and Yewin followed in the rear. They filed out of the mountain just as the lava caught up to where they stood.

Skellig spun and threw up her good hand against the approaching lava, dropping Jak’s spear as she did so. It stopped in midair as Skellig’s Flamedancer brand activated and pushed back against the molten stone. Skellig’s face grew concentrated, then strained.

“Get out of here!” she yelled at Jak. “I can’t hold it very long.”

“Let me help you.” Jak called back, throwing her own magic into the mix. Relics, the force of all that magma coming out of the mountain...Jak could barely push against it even with Skellig’s help. How had Skellig managed to hold it back even for a few seconds?

“You will die if you stay,” Skellig said. “The others need you far more than they need me.”

“Skellig, we need you too, I can’t...”

“You can.” Skellig interrupted her. “Save the Fae and continue to teach the people what you have taught me: that we are all part of something greater.”

But Skellig was her friend. And she was the most military-minded person Jak knew who was on her side, and that of the Fae. They needed someone like that.

Skellig noted her hesitation, but winced at the strain of holding back the lava with her Flamedancing magic. “Go!” she hurled a small bout of fire at Jak. She yelped and dodged out of its way, but lost her concentration on keeping the molten rock at bay. Skellig clenched her jaw and pushed back as hard as she could. Lava was beginning to spew out to the sides, no longer fully contained by Skellig’s magic.

Jak lowered her head to gaze at the Pillar of Eternity in her hands. Skellig was right. The Fae needed her, all of them. Her mother, Amelia, Girwirt, Noralim, not to mention Seph and the other humans that followed him, they all needed the advantage they could gain through the Relic she held in her hands.

“I’m sorry,” she said to Skellig, picking up the spear left on the ground. And with that, she turned and ran.

# S

mall bushes and brambles caught at her heels as she barreled down the mountainside. The path swung back and forth, but Jak cut the distance in giant leaps. Her bones protested each time she landed. At some point she was going to need to brand herself with Toughness to go along with her Strength. That at least would offset the strain she felt on her bones.

She had almost caught up to the Fae, who were nearly at the base of the steep slope, where the mountain blended into some foothills. Perhaps they could make it after all. Skellig must still have been holding off the volcanic assault, as Jak could see no evidence of any lava rushing down to meet them.

Jak held back tears as she ran. Why couldn't she find a way to save Skellig and save the Fae at the same time? She didn't like choices like this. She liked clear right and wrong answers, but what happened when both your decisions hurt innocents?

Time seemed to slow for Jak as she continued running down the mountain. She looked down at the Pillar. *Why? If you're supposed to be this powerful, why can't you fix this? Show me what you do. Help me save Skellig.*

For once, she thought she heard the Pillar respond. *We are more powerful together.* No, that wasn't the staff. That was something Skellig had told her, back when they were locked in the dungeon. Jak had hated the fact that her actions caused others to suffer. But perhaps Skellig had been right. Perhaps they were stronger together, even if it meant life-threatening consequences like what Skellig faced now. If it weren't for her, the lava would fall out of the mountain and kill them all. With her, they stood a fighting chance. Yet Jak was now leaving Skellig to face their threat alone, how did that constitute strength in numbers?

Yewin and the rest of the Fae were just ahead of her now, and the Bright Fae turned to see her. "Where's Skellig?" he asked.

"She..." Jak couldn't bring herself to say the words.

Understanding lit Yewin's eyes as he glanced up towards the

entrance to the mountain. "I see," he said, solemnly.

Time slowed again and Yewin's next words were lost. At first, Jak thought Yewin was just taking a moment of silence out of respect to Skellig. But no, everything was literally slowing down. The rumble of the mountain lowered in tone, Yewin's movements seemed sluggish, as were those of the dwarves and gnomes accompanying him. Jak stared at them. What was happening? Was this some kind of spell Cain was inflicting on them? She couldn't help but glance around to see if the man was near. But that still made no sense. He was powerful, but she didn't think he'd been capable of manipulating time itself.

She looked back the way she had come. There was no sign of Cain, or the dragon, or anything else for that matter. All appeared serene.

*You seek to change the fate of your companion. Why?* A voice sounded in Jak's head. She held the staff in front of her. It was speaking to her again.

"Because we need her. She could help us. And...she's my friend." Jak didn't bother to think the thoughts, instead speaking them out loud.

*She has made the ultimate sacrifice. Time takes all to the great beyond.*

"I know. But this doesn't have to be her time. It's like she said, we're stronger together, but now she's alone."

*She told you to leave, did she not?*

Jak said nothing for a while, continuing to watch as Yewin and the Fae stood, their movements continuing in slow motion. The Pillar waited patiently for her words. Eventually, Jak spoke. "She did, and she was right to do so. We could not have held off the tempest that's coming out of that mountain together. We would have both died."

*So you agree that leaving this woman behind was the right choice.*

"It was the only choice. But that doesn't make it right."

*And if it weren't the only choice? If you could save this companion as well as these others?*

"I would do it in a heartbeat."

There was silence for a time. Everything still moved sluggishly around Jak, even the birds in the sky.

Then the voice returned to her. *You have the heart of a creator. I grant you the gift of time. Use it well.*

The voice ceased speaking, leaving Jak dazed and blinking. Her surroundings stood completely still around her, without even the slightest movement this time. Silence engulfed the mountainside. Yewin and the others did not move a wit, frozen in time.

Time. The gift of time. Is this what the Pillar of Eternity meant? Did its abilities have something to do with the passage of time?

Suddenly it all began to make sense. Earlier, the one time that the staff had given her a hint of its abilities had been when she had that

vision of the future, again related to time. Of course, it was a vision of *several* futures, but they had given her an idea of her best course of action, hinting at what she had to do to save herself and those around her.

And now it was giving her the chance to save Skellig.

Jak nearly skidded on the gravel beneath her feet as she began to run as fast as she could back the way she came. Air seemed to gather around her, and she could feel its resistance, but she pushed through. A strange popping noise echoed near her as she increased her speed and raced to the mountain's entrance. And still time seemed suspended around her.

Her breath was starting to come in large gasps, as she raced up the steep incline, but she pushed forward until she could see Skellig ahead of her. Like the others, the former Watcher was suspended, not moving, and it looked like Jak had arrived just in time.

Molten lava was spewing out of the mountain, fast enough that Jak could still see it move ever so slightly towards Skellig who was in the process of falling backward. Jak had arrived just as Skellig lost control of the lava, just before it threatened to consume her.

Jak reached out and took Skellig by the hand. Would the magic work on Skellig too, allowing her to move normally? Or would she have to carry the warrior down the mountain?

Jak had her answer almost immediately as their hands met. Something passed from the staff, through Jak and into Skellig. The former Watcher promptly fell onto her back and skidded several feet down the path, time resuming its normal course for her at least. Or rather, she sped up to the same speed that Jak was experiencing.

Skellig blinked several times. She saw Jak, and her face contorted in confusion. Then she saw the volcanic eruption that was coming out of the cave entrance. "What...what is?"

"It's a very long story," Jak said, as she went to help the major up on her feet. "Suffice it to say, I think the staff finally decided to do its thing. Hold still for a moment."

Jak concentrated and summoned the magic of her Gifter brand while grabbing Skellig's bad arm. The woman winced as Jak touched the tender skin, but her eyes widened as she realized what Jak was doing. "Is that really wise!" she shrieked just as Jak's brand flared to life and a new patchwork of black lines etched themselves into Skellig's forearm. A perfect Healing brand. Skellig stared at it, as if not quite believing her eyes.

"That should help with the arm," said Jak, moving behind Skellig to help lift her onto her feet.

When she stood, Skellig said, "How did you know it wouldn't turn me into a demon?"

Jak shrugged. "I've known it was safe for a while. It's worked for me and I've branded a lot of weapons with this brand, among others. There was no reason to think it wouldn't work."

"Yes but," Skellig didn't seem to have any more words.

"It's about time I started using this gift to help others." Jak said. "You were right, Skellig. We are stronger together. Literally, I can make everyone more powerful. Perhaps then we can defeat someone like Cain."

She glanced back at the explosion. Cain and the dragon were still in there somewhere. Both of them had shown some resilience to the lava, but Jak could only hope that Cain found himself injured enough, or drained of enough power that he remained trapped in the mountain forever. However, something told her that would not be the case.

Skellig was staring in all directions. "What has happened to everything? Why is it all frozen? How did you accomplish this?"

"I decided your life was not worth losing. And the Relic agreed," said Jak. She began jogging down the hill again. "We'd better go. I'm not sure how long this effect will last."

Skellig followed and they trotted down the path at a steady pace. Not as fast as earlier when Jak had scrambled down as fast as she could go, but enough to make good time. They didn't want the magic to suddenly stop working and have a storm of lava crashing them down.

The staff said nothing more to Jak, and she had an instinctive feeling that it would not come again. It had surrendered its power to Jak, and that was the end of it. She could only hope that she was worthy of the gift.

She saw Yewin and the others still frozen in place ahead of them. "This is very strange." Skellig intoned as they approached.

As if sensing that they were safely away from the mountain entrance, the magic suddenly ceased. Yewin and the others began to move again, and most jumped in surprise as they caught sight of Skellig.

"Where did the other giant come from?" said Girwirt. "Dragons and doorknobs, she wasn't there before!"

"Skellig?" Yewin asked, looking equally surprised.

"We don't have time. I'll explain later." Jak said. As if punctuating her words, an explosion rocked the mountain and she looked over her shoulder to see dark smoke emanating from far above at the top of the giant peak. That must have come through the hole that they saw above the Fae city. It seemed so far away now. She thought she could see more bright lava coming in their direction. "Come on! We need to find somewhere safe."

They continued running down the mountainside, eventually

coming to some of the foothills below. As they ran, a roar could be heard coming from above and behind them. When Jak tried to find the source of the sound, she saw what must have been the dragon climbing its way out of the very top of the mountain where the smoke billowed.

The giant creature spread its wings wide. It was a majestic thing. Even under their circumstances, Jak took a moment to marvel as she watched it take off into the sky. Incredible that such a creature could fly like that. It rose into the air then sped away east in the opposite direction. Good, at least it wouldn't cause them any more trouble if it kept on that course.

That left only Cain among her worries. With the Dragon gone, would he find a way out as well? Was he even alive? Or was he trapped in the underground tunnels that must have either filled with lava or collapsed by now.

Even if he was alive, she had the power of a Pillar of Eternity in the staff she carried. She could probably stand up to him using that magic. Though she wouldn't want to risk it. Especially because there was always the chance that he could take the Pillar from her. Even if it didn't work for him, he would still have an advantage over her in terms of raw power. Additionally, there were two more Pillars out there somewhere. If Cain got his hands on one or both of them, who knew what could happen.

So whatever happened next, finding the other two Pillars of Eternity must become her top priority.

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hey found Watchers scattered everywhere near the base of the mountain. Most had avoided the troughs and valleys, which isolated them from the flowing rivers of lava that continued to flow steadily from the mountain. Most of the Watchers looked like they were still in good condition, and most left them alone. They had their own problems to worry about.

They also found several more Fae, who had managed to make it out ahead of Jak and the rest. The Fae joined their ranks as they saw them, growing their number steadily.

Of course, Jak knew that there were probably still some Fae that had perished in the mountain, and that thought alone made her heart sink. It seemed there were always heavy casualties among the Fae. Many of the Water Fae had died or been experimented on by Queen Telma and her Royal Priest. And many of the Shadow and Bright Fae died in battle. But there were still a lot of these new Earth and Fire Fae, these dwarves and gnomes. They had built up a whole civilization, and that did not crumble overnight as their city had.

The loss of the city was a shame as well. There would be no question about going back for the Fae. Nothing could possibly remain. Their home was lost.

“Jak!” A voice broke Jak out of her thoughts. She turned and saw a familiar face running towards her from another of the foothills.

“Nolm!” she said, and broke off to one side to meet him halfway. He surprised her by wrapping her up in a hug.

“I’m glad you made it out,” he said, breaking the hug quickly.

“I’m glad you did too.” Jak glanced behind Nolm to see a small group of Watchers standing there, staring at them. She knew some of those soldiers. Many had escorted her around when she’d been their captive, much as Nolm had.

“Uh...” Nolm was now looking at the large group of Fae, who were gathering up behind Jak.

“It’s okay, Nolm. They won’t harm you.”

“Though we really should,” muttered a voice behind Jak. Girwirt’s

voice.

“Don’t listen to him,” Jak said. “How many of the others got out?”

“A lot of us. We made for the exit as soon as stone began to fall from the ceiling. Though the captain insisted that we find the general first. He took a few of us and went deeper into the tunnels. We haven’t seen them since.”

Jak’s face fell. “I don’t think there’s a high chance they survived.”

“The general too?”

Jak hesitated. Cain could still be alive, but should she really get into that subject right now? “Probably,” she said, nodding.

“Well, it’s just that...” Nolm ran a hand through his hair and down to his neck. “With them gone, we don’t have anyone to follow. And, uh...we were sort of hoping. If it’s not too much trouble...”

“You want to come with us?” Jak said, in disbelief. “You know we’re not going back to Skyecliff, right? And the queen would kill me if she saw me again. We’re not her friends.”

“I know,” said Nolm. Some of his companions had drawn closer now, standing around the young Watcher. “It’s just that, some of us, we believe you.”

Jak’s face flushed. It wasn’t embarrassment or love that she felt. It was gratitude, pure, sweet gratitude. Her time as a prisoner hadn’t been pointless after all. She tried to keep her eyes dry.

“It would mean renouncing the Watchers. I don’t know if they’d try to arrest you or not, but they did with Skellig.”

“Well, it’s like you said,” Nolm continued, his voice a little stronger now. “Sometimes you come to realize that not all leaders are good. But some are.” He nodded at Jak. They were all looking at Jak. “Besides, I doubt the queen has anything good to say to us after all this. Her source of armor and weapons is cut off.”

Nope, she wasn’t going to hold back those tears. They began to flow freely as she grasped Nolm’s hand and then faced the others. “Then you are all welcome to come with us.”

“But...” Girwirt began.

“No, Girwirt, this is important. If we humans can’t learn to work together with the Fae than we will never make any progress.”

Girwirt folded his arms. “Told you not to call us that.” But he seemed to accept her decision. The others looked agreeable at least, so that was something. Though Jak expected some of them might have trouble overlooking the pain that the Watchers had caused them. She just had to help them see that not all their enemies were bad people.

“We know a few others who would like to come,” Nolm said, looking far more enthusiastic now that Jak had accepted his offer. “If we can wait until we round them all up, we could all go together to...wherever you’re planning on going.”

"Ah yes, that does bring up an interesting question," said Yewin, stepping forward beside Jak. "Where do we plan to go?"

"I know a place," said Jak. "My friends and many of the other varieties of Fae—" she ignored Girwirt's protest, "—are gathering perhaps a hundred miles from here, near my hometown of Riverbrook. It's defensible, there's a lot of land for farming, and it's full of welcoming people."

"Sounds wonderful!" said Nolm, wringing his hands together. The young man certainly seemed excited.

They talked it over, but in the end they agreed that going to Riverbrook was the best course. At least for now. It would allow them to regroup and figure out what to do next. Though many of the dwarves and gnomes protested, seeking instead to return to the mountains. Jak only managed to get them on her side once she promised that they could do so after arriving in Riverbrook. She preferred if they all stuck together, but she wouldn't force them if they wanted to leave.

Nolm and the other Watchers gathered as many of their companions as they could. Some refused, and they even had to stop one fight breaking out as one of the Watchers called them traitors. But overall, there were more interested in joining them than Jak expected. Most seemed disgruntled with how they had treated the Fae in the mountain and wanted to make up for it somehow. The glory of being a Watcher no longer held the same luster it once had.

They stayed in the area for one day, with Jak pushing for them to leave even sooner. She still couldn't tell if Cain was alive inside the mountain. If he had escaped then they would face a far greater danger than rivers of lava.

But eventually everyone they expected to come with them had gathered, including a few remaining dwarves and gnomes that had gotten out. Jak, feeling the eyes of dozens, perhaps a few hundred people, began to lead them away from Mt. Harafast.

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hey travelled for several days, doing their best to forage for food and supplies. Many of the Watchers were good at hunting, and they feasted on local rabbit and venison as often as not. “Not half as good as mushrooms,” Girwirt liked to say.

Occasionally they ran into a stray demon, something that very much alarmed the Fae at first. But Skellig and Jak were able to make quick work of them, and none attacked in any large enough force to be a significant threat.

Jak found herself feeling oddly satisfied with everything that had happened. Sure, she had been a prisoner trapped in a mountain for weeks. But she had come out with a Pillar of Eternity. Thanks to the teamwork established with her Fae friends, Skellig, and others, they had accomplished a lot in that mountain.

She still held a creeping feeling that Cain was alive, though he hadn’t appeared at any point in their journey. She could only hope that he had left to lick his wounds. But she knew one thing, if the man was still alive, he would be coming for her eventually. She had a Pillar of Eternity, and he would not stop until he got it.

Two weeks into their journey, Jak saw familiar mountains on their left. They were almost there! She wasn’t sure how that made her feel. Part of her was excited to be so close to her old home again. Another part formed a heavy weight in her stomach. This had been where her life unraveled. Her father was buried here, as were many of her childhood friends. Could she deal with the reminder of their memories? As they grew closer to the river that bordered her old home, she felt her anticipation rise.

“I see something,” Skellig called out to the rest of them. Jak looked where Skellig was pointing. Sure enough there was something in the distance. Not a structure or building, but what looked like several tents surrounded by tiny specks that had to be people.

“That must be them,” Jak said, and she increased her pace. The others also followed suit.

When they were about a mile away, a voice called to them out of

thin air, loud enough for all to hear. “Stop right where you are!”

Instantly they all obeyed, and everyone looked frantically to find the source of the voice. Jak, however, was smiling.

“It’s okay, Vander. They’re with me.”

“Jak?” The air shimmered in front of her and her friend Vander materialized. “Yewin, Skellig? How did you?” His midnight visage and green eyes took some of the others aback, but Jak rushed forward and threw her hands around the Shadow Fae.

“It’s so good to see you.” She squeezed him tight.

“And you as well, but we thought you were far from here. Your teacher told us that you’d gone away to the Mt. Harafast. That’s at least ten days’ journey.”

“Fifteen days when you’re traveling with a lot of slow walkers.”

“Hey!” Girwirt protested.

“And these, ah, what exactly are these?” Vander said staring around at Jak’s companions.

“May I introduce you to the Earth and Fire Fae, though they would prefer it if you called them dwarves and gnomes.”

“An honor,” Vander bowed slightly to the shorter Fae. “When we first transformed nearly eighteen years ago we never thought we would see other races emerge. And these are my fellow Shadow Fae.” He whistled, and suddenly their entire group was surrounded by shadowy beings. The Watchers in Jak’s group nearly panicked and raised their weapons, while the unarmed dwarves and gnomes simply huddled together.

Jak raised a hand to calm the Watchers. “It’s okay, they’re friends.”

“I expect you’ll want to speak to the others as soon as you can?” said Vander, ignoring the slight outburst from Jak’s companions.

“Yes,” Jak said. It would be so good to see her mother and friends again. Would Amelia be here? Or Seph?

Vander and the other Shadow Fae escorted them the rest of the way. When they approached the tents, Jak caught sight of a lone figure waiting for them. She knew that woman.

Leaving her companions in her dust, she sped forward and embraced her mother with everything she had in her. Karlona hugged her back, silver tears coming to her eyes. “When we saw your party on the horizon I never thought it would be you.”

Jak let herself relax in her mother’s embrace. “I’m sorry I left,” she said. She hadn’t told her mother that she was leaving Skyecliff. She supposed the news had probably shocked her.

Karlona broke the embrace and put a hand on Jak’s cheek. “We can talk about that later. I’m just glad to see you again. What is that you have there?” She pointed at the Pillar of Eternity.

“It’s a long story,” Jak said, wondering where to start.

“Then you can tell me later once I’ve informed the rest of your arrival. Who are your companions? Oh, Skellig and Yewin, you’re here too!”

Skellig smiled and stepped forward to give Karlona a hug. Yewin followed. “We found your daughter just outside of Mt. Harafast,” Skellig said, smiling as she did so. “We have quite the story to tell.”

“I can imagine,” said Karlona, now facing the dwarves and gnomes. “And who are these little people?”

Jak finished explaining what she could about the dwarves, gnomes, and Watcher companions, though she glossed over the specifics of their story. They’d have more time for that later. Karlona greeted each group in turn with a warmth that seemed to take some of them by surprise. Especially the Watchers.

Hopefully, they’d see that the Fae were people, just like them. This could be a very good thing for these Watchers.

“Vander, will you take everyone and see that they’re settled?” Karlona said. Vander nodded without protest and waved to indicate they should all follow him. Karlona, however, turned to Jak where she stood with Skellig and Yewin. “You three, I’m assuming you’d like to speak to the council.”

There was a council now? That was news to Jak. But she nodded anyway, as did Skellig and Yewin.

Karlona led them through the tents to the other side of the camp. The place was impressive, spanning probably thousands of feet in all directions. Humans, Shadow Fae, and Bright Fae walked between the tents, some of them stopping in their tracks as they caught sight of Jak. Yes, they all knew who she was. Jak said nothing, but continued to walk with the Pillar of Eternity in her hand.

They soon arrived at the banks of the river, where a makeshift stone table had been erected with several chairs laid around it. “Wait here,” Karlona said. “I’ll round up the others.”

Jak took a moment to look across the river. Not far on the other side was her home town. In fact, if she squinted she thought she could just make out one of the farms that lay closest to the river. That would probably have been Harup’s land. Beyond that would be her father’s grazing pastures. So close.

“Jak! Oh my goodness!”

Jak was instantly pulled out of her thoughts by the sound of her best friend’s voice. “Amelia!” she shouted as her eyes found the Water Fae.

Amelia rose out of the river itself, held aloft by her own innate magic that controlled the pillar of water surrounding her. Her upper body was covered in a tight dark suit that clung to her skin, but her legs were not there, replaced instead by a giant fin that she used to

position herself in the water. Jak raced to her and threw her arms around her friend, ignoring the water that splashed all over her.

“It’s so good to see you again!” said Amelia, releasing Jak. “Though I’m never going to forgive you for leaving like that. Where did you go? Gabriel said you went to some mountain somewhere. Why did you go? Did you find anything there? Who are these two?”

A smile of pure joy pushed itself onto Jak’s face. Good old Amelia, she hadn’t changed a bit. Well, not her mind and attitude at least. “This is Skellig and Yewin.”

“A pleasure,” said Skellig, stepping forward. “We’ve never seen a Water Fae before now.”

“Well, this is what we look like!” said Amelia cheerfully. Just then, another of the Water Fae rose in her own pillar of water. Jak recognized her as Cerai, one of the first people to become a Water Fae.

“It’s good to see you,” the second Water Fae said, nodding at Jak.

“You too. I’m glad you’re all safe.”

“Safe is a relative term,” said a voice behind Jak. She turned and her smile only deepened when she saw who approached. The speaker was Gabriel, and behind him stood Seph and Elva, one of Seph’s followers. Karlona brought up the rear.

It was almost too much for Jak to handle. So many of her friends were here, and they were all safe! At least they looked that way. There was one noteable person absent. Naem. Jak wasn’t exactly sure how she felt about that. On the one hand, she didn’t have to worry about what she would say to him, or how she could avoid him. But on the other, it just showed that he may have left their cause forever. She’d have to ask about him later. Not that she needed to know what happened to him, really.

She rushed forward and gave them each a hug, lingering just a little with Seph as all thought of Naem left her mind. When they separated Seph’s warm eyes greeted her own, and he flashed that smile of his. “I’m glad you’re safe, Jak. We were worried.”

“Yes, well I told you, I don’t think any of us could have stopped her from leaving,” said Gabriel, his gruff voice carrying a hint of amusement as he watched Jak and Seph. “I...my word.” His eyes had found the staff that Jak carried. “Jak, is that...”

Jak turned to her former teacher, meeting his eyes. “It is.”

Gabriel was silent for a second, before he took two steps forward till he was right next to Jak and ran a hand along the polished black metal. “Broken Brands,” he breathed.

“What did you mean, ‘safe is a relative term’?” asked Jak, changing the subject.

“We can talk about that another time,” said Seph, stepping in before Gabriel could say more. “For now, it looks like you have a long

story to explain. Why don't you catch us up?"

Hearing his voice did more than put her at ease. It warmed her in a way that she hadn't known she missed. Seph had that way with people.

So she started at the beginning, from when she left Skyecliff all the way until their recent escape and travel to Riverbrook.

Time passed in a hurry, and before any of them knew what had happened, night had come.

## Epilogue

**A** hand protruded from the lip of Mt. Harafast's caldera. It barely fit the definition of what most would call a hand. The skin hung on its bone, and the surface was blackened with soot and charred flesh.

Cain pulled himself clear of the mountain. His hair was gone, and his flesh was a mangled mass of melted skin, exposing his bones in some places. His eyes had healed themselves by now, but they burned a white-hot blue. He would never be the same after this, even with all his healing brands combined.

He had lasted, buried in rock and pure lava for days. With all his power, it still took him all that time to move through solid rock. He lived, of course. Nothing of this world could kill him. Not burning lava, not suffocation, not even that dragon whom the girl had so craftily awakened.

The girl. Darkness grew around Cain, and the air cracked with power. Clearly, he had underestimated her and her filthy obsession with these so-called Fae. Those beings were a representation of everything he hated. They were the confirmation of his father's prophecies. The proof of his words. Even now after millennia of wandering, his father still found ways to haunt him.

All that would have to change.

Cain took a few shaky steps down one side of the volcano. He would need to regroup after this, take some time to figure out his next strategy. This Jak, though far less powerful than he, had proved herself a worthy opponent, if perhaps a bit lucky. But that luck could not hold out forever. And Cain had all the time in the world.

He would find her, and he would make her wish for death. He would take the Pillar of Eternity from her rotting corpse and use it to dominate these people and kill every last Fae if it was the last thing he did. Then he would leave this place and find other lands to conquer. All would respect Cain.

He reached out with his awareness, searching for his children. Yes, they were there. He summoned them, and they came, attracted to

their master.

As Cain found himself at the base of the mountain they arrived, surrounded him, their human jaws snapping in delight at the prospect of bathing in his power. There were only a handful of them, but Cain had purposely kept most away from this mountain while he used the Watchers to do his work instead.

“That’s right, my children,” he said, caressing the mottled gray flesh of their heads. “A little time, and you will taste blood again.”

His creations howled into the growing night.

## Author's Note

Well you've made it through book three. By the time I wrote this book, I'd learned a lot about writing and story structure, and I think it shows to some extent here. I literally wrote the first draft for this book in four weeks, a personal record. The narrative simply flowed a lot more, and also required less editing to get it where I wanted. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Once again, thank you for choosing to read my books. I'm glad that you're as interested in experiencing Jak's adventures as I am. I look at this book as kind of the last in a trilogy, even though there are five books that come after this. This is the last book that sets up Jak's rise as a leader. It signals the end of her negative flaws. She will still have challenges of an external and personal nature to overcome, but by now she has learned to believe in herself, to fight for others in need, and to work with others to accomplish what's right. Those are the three personal challenges she's faced so far. They have shaped her into a formidable hero, internally and externally. I think you'll enjoy seeing where she goes from here.

Speaking of which, the next book will introduce a new species of Fae, just like each book has done so far. And Jak will have to tackle a few new challenges sent by the Queen, whilst not forgetting the threat posed by Cain and the demons.

If you enjoyed this book, I'd like to ask one favor. Could you head over to Amazon and [leave a review](#)? Reviews really help with the discoverability of my work. It's the best thing you could do (other than maybe recommending it to a friend) if you want to see this series do well in the future. I'd really appreciate that. Thank you!

And if you want to be notified of any new releases, you can sign up for [my mailing list](#), which grants you exclusive access to a number of other stories set within the Argoverse, including a prequel short story to this series, which outlines a few adventures of Jak's father, Rael.

Thanks again, and I'll see you in the next book: Into Storm.

## About the Author

Jason Hamilton is an unapologetic nerd of all things science fiction and fantasy. He is the author of the *Roots of Creation* and *Alice: The Last Founder* series, and many other forthcoming novels.

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To World's Above

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Year One

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